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# ICAV Perspective Paper

## Searching in Intercountry Adoption

**Lived Experience Perspectives**

17 May 2023

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## Introduction

Searching is immensely complex when it involves crossing international borders with differences in race, culture, language, values/norms, laws and religions. We have seen hundreds of thousands of intercountry adoptees being sent abroad from our birth lands without much thought to our lifelong journey. Ultimately, a good majority of us want to know basic facts about ourselves and therefore about our families - who are they and how we came to be without them.

The latest research published by Korea's Human Rights study<sup>1</sup>, shows what I have seen in my own 25 years providing support to this community: that it is absolutely normal for adoptees to be curious and want to search at some point in their lives. It varies as to when we begin our search, for example, some want to know very young, for others it's a life triggering moment eg birth of our own children, the death of adoptive parents which propels us to act.

Sadly, since the inception of intercountry adoption, there has been a lack of foresight by all involved, to understand the huge need we have for formal support and resources in helping us find our original families. For this reason, we aim to raise awareness and bring you our lived experience with some of us have spent years, often decades, searching. As governments around the world now start to fully recognise the importance of helping us reconnect and search for our origins, we aim to provide the much needed resources that our community needs to equip itself to learn the lessons from past searching practices and efforts.

Huge thanks to the 26 adoptees who gave their experience, energy and time to this paper! I appreciate the significant level of trust that comes with opening up and sharing our most vulnerable experiences and hope that you, the reader, will also appreciate what these participants offer.

*Lynelle Long*

Founder

Intercountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://intercountryadopteevoices.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/230222-Korean-Human-Rights-Study-on-Koreans-adopted-overseas.pdf>

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## Ryan Anderson

*Born in Morocco, raised in Scotland*

I was 18 when my parents told me I was adopted so I'm known as a late discovery adoptee. It really messed me up. I kept my adoption a secret from everyone else in my life for another 12 years. I travelled a lot, lived in Ibiza, had a busy life and managed to ignore it. Then Covid and lockdowns hit and I couldn't avoid it any longer. Since then, adoption has ruled my life. I decided I had to trace my roots and am on a reunion journey.

A theory I was told was I was found in a street in Morocco and taken to a hospital. I was adopted by my Moroccan father and English mother and brought to live in Scotland. While they were going through the process of adopting me, which was complicated, I spent some time with a foster family in Morocco. This is about as much as I know. I always wondered why my skin was darker than my siblings and could never work out why. There are so many unanswered questions.

I took a DNA test and the results only identified a 4<sup>th</sup> cousin, which is not a good match. I applied to be on Long Lost Families twice but have not been successful so far. In June, I took a trip to Morocco to try and find more information. Every single piece of information is valuable to me. Everyone deserves to know where they come from.

It's hard work trying to find information in another country and in another language. I don't speak Arabic and so I need to have someone with me to interpret. I met my foster family and they were positive about the likelihood of me tracing my birth family. I visited the hospital I spent time in and saw my name in a court register, but getting more information is difficult. I got sent to five different offices and then back to where I started. Each place I went, I got told I had to go somewhere else to get the information I wanted, or the person I needed to see was on holiday, or the files were in an old archive, or the information didn't exist. At the hospital, they wanted money from me. You have to be careful not get scammed. There are a lot of people trying to make money out of you.

I appeared on some national television programmes in the hope that someone watching would know something, but nothing resulted from that. In 1990 Moroccan society, there is shame around women having children outside of marriage, they could get in trouble from the authorities and lots of babies are abandoned for that reason, or because

of the poverty. I know there are many barriers to finding out who my birth parents are. I've tried going through the embassies, but I've waited months and months for a response and they don't seem to be able to help that much. You need to be persistent, but it's very draining. I've hit a dead end for now and feel in limbo, so I need to go back to Morocco. It's expensive and I'll need to save up more money.

I love Scotland but I was taken away from my roots. One thing I noticed in Morocco is despite the poverty, the people there were happy. I'd like to meet my Moroccan family and thank them, but I don't know if I will ever get the chance to do that. I am close to my adoptive mum and she's been a huge support to me.

I struggle to know where I fit in – in my adoptive family, in Morocco, in Scotland and even with other adopted people. I have low points when I think that everyone else is happier and more solid than me. I try to be spontaneous to keep my head above water, and then I can crash. I think I can be hard work and I can push people away and self-sabotage. I know I'm hard on myself. I have ambitions to be successful and to have a family, but I'm not sure how to achieve these yet.

In July last year, I decided to share my experiences publicly. I made a YouTube video, talked to the press and published my story on my website. I find it healing to talk about my situation and I'm keen to share my story.

Even small pieces of information mean a lot to me and there is always the outside chance that someone listening, watching or even reading this will know something which will really matter to me.

To hear more of Ryan's story visit his YouTube channel *Ryan Anderson, Me Opening Up – My Life Story* and visit his website [peshy37.wordpress.com](http://peshy37.wordpress.com)

This story has also been published at [adopted.com](http://adopted.com)

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# Craig S Askinazi

*Born in Colombia, raised in the USA*

My name is Craig and I am from Bogotá, Colombia originally. I was raised and adopted in the United States of America from the young age of 2 months.

My search for biological family started when my wife and I began to have children. Something just clicked within me and I needed to know more about my origins: who were my parents and do I have any brothers and sisters? I was about 40 years old when I had my first child, so I waited almost 40 years to start.

I prepared for my search by speaking with other Colombian adoptees. In the beginning, I did not include my adoptive parents, but I mentioned to them that I was submitting my DNA to look for my origins. They were okay with this. However, before all of this DNA stuff, I hired an investigator because I thought that would be the fastest route (that was about four and a half years ago). Through this route, I learned that the woman on my birth certificate died 30 years ago and had no family. This was not good enough. Something inside of me said maybe this is not the way to go because DNA was starting to gain popularity and plus, if I wasn't able to find my mom, maybe I could find my dad. So I went all out in DNA tests.

I bought kits from the three major DNA companies. Each kit was about \$80 to \$100. So wham, I looked at my results 4 years ago and I saw a first cousin! However, after writing to her a couple a few times, my hope began to fade. I was able to tell she did not look at her DNA results nor my messages, so I was now left finding out for myself.

It took another two years of searching on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and virtually every other social media app but one day, I was able to locate her and I found my paternal side as well. Sadly, my dad died 10 years before, so I never got to meet him. Fortunately, he left me with a big family! I now have 8 half brothers and sisters. I eventually visited them at the tail end of COVID. It was a great experience!

Onto finding my mom. My dad had an affair and thus no-one knew my mom. This is where my search gets going. I took the initiative to test with many, many people who were related to my DNA matches. I must have sent 10-20 DNA kits to Colombia and spent over a thousand dollars. I realise not everyone has the means to do this and it sucks that

some of our adoption papers are false and sometimes this is the only way to send kits back and forth to Colombia and the United States. I did not know any other way.

The way I look at it is that no-one else is going to find the answers for me if I want to find my mom or her family, I must not leave any stone unturned. And so as of today, I've hit many roadblocks but I believe there is a good chance I will find my mom or at least her family via DNA.

In February 2020, a DNA match of 145CM finally responded back to me and gave me some information that would help me ultimately on my journey. It has been approximately three years and one month since he first wrote me back and I've tested with maybe 5 to 7 people from his family to determine who my direct family is. It has been a long journey with many curves and twists but just last week, I was able to finally find a first cousin and an aunt! I am beyond excited. At this point, I am keeping my fingers crossed. Now there is a half sibling out there who will hopefully send her DNA test back to the United States and then I will begin the process of introducing myself to everyone and confirming who I am to them. I do not know if the lady who is my mom knows of me yet, but she is alive and she has several children. Lastly, let me confirm based on my search results so far, that FANA, the orphanage where I came from, gave me and my adoptive parents a fake birth certificate.

I would recommend anyone who is looking to not give up and use DNA because somehow there are clues in our DNA matches. It takes time, money, patience and luck. To me, it was a puzzle and I was connecting the dots and sometimes it was very difficult but ultimately it led me to find answers. I encourage people to connect with other people who have done this before because there are certain ways to do this efficiently. And understanding DNA is half the battle. It's unfortunate and not fair that we have search high and low sometimes for answers but these are important questions.

I wish everyone the best of luck in their search!



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## Gabbie Beckley

*Born in Sri Lanka, raised in Australia*

When I cook, standing in my kitchen, surrounded by the scents and smells of Sri Lankan spices, curries and dhals, I am transported back to one of my first memories of meeting my amma in her small smokey kitchen back in the year 2000. I then fast forward to 2019, sitting in my younger sisters apartment watching her cook, being entranced by the smells, laughter and life coming from her kitchen in her home.

My life has taken so many unexpected twists and turns. I reflect upon the different versions of myself through my search and reunion with my family. I reflect at the past global climate when Sri Lanka was in the grips of a bloody civil war war and what life is like now amidst the current political instability.

I think of choices parents make for their children and the hopes and dreams we have for them. I know we all share a common thread, we want our children to be happy, healthy and content with life. I know that is what my amma and thatha want(ed) for me and my siblings and I know that is what I want for my children.

Yet the complex psychosocial strings that took me away from my first family and weaved a complex narrative in my second, continues to undo and reconnect as I attempt to parent my own and leaves me feeling some days like I have an understanding of what's going on, yet most days, I struggle to make sense of it all.

My story is mine to tell, yet I am only one part of a multitude of layers, stories and connections. To tell my story is to honour my first family's story. Our story is a love story of two people shaped by an extreme set of extraordinary circumstances that include war, love, poverty and hope. Then my second family who also experienced war, love, loss, trauma and hope; and finally the family that I have created, also has love, loss, hope and possibilities.

The way that I comprehend searching for my family is it has always been about finding out who I am, recognising the person staring back at me in the mirror and understanding who I am as a person and how I relate to the world.

Searching for me is coming to understand it doesn't stop when you have the answer to your prayers, it's then understanding and building relationships with the people who share your bloodlines and those that don't. It's accepting the choices that people made 'in your best interests' and placing those choices with the people that made them and not on myself.

Searching over the past 23 years has been important, life affirming and life saving. I have now know my first family longer than I haven't known them — and for me that's important milestone because it helps me understand the complex person within.

I know the trauma of that first great loss in my life has impacted my whole life. I want to bust the myth that love it s enough to conquer the hurt, pain and the trauma — it is not.

Connection, meaningful connections and conversations, intentional understanding, acceptance, trauma informed care and a safe space to feel my feelings is what I have needed. Finding purpose and meaning in my life has come from reuniting with my family, culture and kin. I know what it is like to walk the walk and I know why it's important to give back and assist others in their journey of healing.

Searching has never been the end goal, searching is part of the healing journey I take every day.

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## Florence Chabert D'hieres

*Born in Sri Lanka, raised in France*

I was adopted from Sri Lanka at three weeks of age by my French parents. I was raised in France and lived and worked in 10 different countries. I am a Third culture adult, which means that if you ask me where is home, I will not give you a proper answer as for me and my family living as an expat, home is where my heart is!

During one of my expat journey experiences, one of my dear friends sent me the link of the documentary in French about the stolen children of Sri Lanka. I was in the middle of a move and was not ready to watch at the time, but once settle in my new country I remembered about it and started to watch it. I started to cry and felt empty but also relieved because I always knew something was not right but I couldn't say what. The story I was told was actually false but what to do about it? I recognised this woman Mrs Pereira who I once considered as a saviour because she offered the best gift to my parents who could not have children: ME!

I contacted directly a fellow Sri Lankan adoptee, Celine Breyse, she was so kind to help me and tell me where I should start this journey, without knowing really what would be the destination.

I went to have my file which I manage to get, I had a name but not much more, I asked so many people to help in my quest. All came back saying they couldn't find anything until one day Celine called me. Andrew found this name that was on the birth certificate and Celine told me she was an acting mother.

So what? what's next? We had a call with her and found out that her son was a monk and that one of the monks in the community could speak English so we had a What'sApp call and this is when I understood two things:

1. I will never know what happened to my birth mother. It seems it has been told to her that I died. I feel I always kind of knew this at the back of my head, I lost one child and my biggest fear was that the birth mum would have been told so and would have suffered her whole life for 'nothing'. This was really the purpose of my search, being able to tell her I am alive and I am happy!

2. I arrived at the end of the journey and did connect with many caring people who have tried to help but I will never know and this is an answer in itself!

So I am relieved I went through this bumpy road, I am at peace now that the road is a dead end and at least I know!

What I know is that my acting mother really wanted to give me a chance to have a great life in a loving family which I did , my job today without knowing it when I started it a decade ago, when I did not know I was part of a child trafficking, is to help third culture kids understand who we are and build our identity and sense of belonging. Even before the search, my mission in life was to help others find who they are!

Thanks to Amanda, I have done my DNA test and am connected to my wonderful cousin Anais whom I haven't met in real life yet, but I cherish our relationships.

I can tell my three daughters that even if we don't know where we come from, we are like the burger metaphor that I create: the bread is your passport country, so I am French, I have curry seeds on the top and my bread is gluten free as I found out at the time of my search that I had coeliac disease. All the countries I lived in are the ingredients and values I have built and I know where I belong, even if I did not have a family reunion, or a name of a birth mum. I know that the most important point in this child trafficking story, is my acting mother gave me the chance to meet my parents - so for me, I'm confident today. Even if I do not know what to expect, I will never know my whole story, but at least I know along the road I am blessed - I became who I am today living in many different countries. I get to help change lives by helping them build their own burger of identity. Even if I don't know where I come from, I know where I want to go.

This is a testimony of my acting mother as I am one of the two adults she facilitated:

*"I'm not selling them!"*

*Many of the architects of these crimes are too old, or long dead. But in Embilipitiya, Amanda met someone who revealed her supporting role in the sordid chain. In a house full of Buddha images, Ranjane Welipitiyage, a rotund, jolly woman, spoke of being an "acting mother." For posing as a mother to help with two adoptions, she earned some chocolate, chewing gum, a shampoo bottle, clothes, and 2,000 LKR (₹800 to ₹1000, then).*

*In the mid-1980s, a woman connected to a hospital near Ranjanees home first asked if she could help with placing an abandoned child for adoption. "The reason why I gave my name without fear is that this child didnt have parents and if theyre going to get good lives, then its okay," she said. "Im not selling them." She was hosted in Colombo by the purported adoption workers and told not to talk to the six or seven other women who had also come with babies.*

*In court, the magistrate asked why she was sending the child away. "I had difficulty looking after the child," she lied.*

*Ranjanees was also told to cajole women into considering adoption. "What the intermediary said was that if there are children being neglected, left without parents, or struggling to be brought up, to let her know," she said. In her village, she encouraged at least one mother to consider this route. She claimed she was never paid for this. "I helped because a child destined to die would be able to live somewhere."*

*Years later, when two adult adoptees abroad asked Andrew Silva to conduct searches for them, he found that the Ranjanees Welipitiyage mentioned in their birth papers was not, in fact, their birth mother. She reflected on what she had done and cried. "If they are doing okay," she said, "then Im happy."*

**Source :**

Family Tree DNA led by Amanda Janssen

Andrew Silva and Céline Breyse Auteur du livre Good Morning Nilanthi

Fondatrice du groupe FB et Collectif "Adoptés du Sri Lanka-Recherche d'Origine- Info Fraude"

To my cousin Anais found thanks to the DNA.

Testimonie of my acting mother

[https://fiftytwo.in/story/the-match/?](https://fiftytwo.in/story/the-match/)

fbclid=IwAR0K3ln7hPFwMQ0Iis8nenp\_0cf4oVhnOSo8ov8-GNjJ3eJkQqkWkkI10dA

TV documentary where I found out about the stolen children of Sri Lanka

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYNRHAYHV4k>

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## Dionne Draper

*Born in the UK as a transracial person of African Jamaican / Trinidad heritage.*

*Mi come inna dis world*

*Friday, 1973*

*Di hopes fi distant ancestors*

*Exist in each black note*

*Kicking mi nuh silent*

*Mi live*

*Kicking mi nuh silent*

*Mi live*

*Kicking mi nuh silent*

*Mi live*

*(Nina, DAWTA 2019)*

I am an African diaspora Jamaican/Trinidad adoptee born in the UK. I had minimal details of my birth but more than many. I had my birth certificate with my mother's first name and surname, my birth name and father unknown. I also had the hospital name and city I was born, Birmingham. I had an A4 typed document describing my physical appearance in racist language and that I had an older brother.

I decided I would search when I was 21. When I was ready I met someone who traced my brother's address which led me to my birth mother's address in Birmingham.

Due to being born pre- 1975 I've been led to believe my adoption files have been destroyed, which is a massive barrier to information. Who knew? What were the circumstances of my conception? Did anyone want to keep me? I also experienced barriers after I found my birth family, my birth mother did not want a reunion and we have never met.

I let my adoptive mother know I was searching but I didn't seek her help. My friends were my support structure. I would consider that friendships might be more useful than adoptive families in the searching process, due to the emotional proximity.

My greatest ethical dilemma was using my brother's address to get to my mother. This was a desperate move, due to lack of information. But, I would recommend that you

consider how you engage with birth family from the start as it will be what your relationship is built on.

I think adoptees are often very trusting and are living in hope of a happy reunion. I was. I learnt that actions speak louder than words. Trust your search experience and the actions of the people you meet , the actions will be a lot more truthful than words.

A half brother on my paternal side found me through ancestry.com 2 years ago. This has been incredibly rewarding. (DNA)

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## Huyen Friedlander

*Born in Vietnam, raised in the USA*

On Sunday, I learned that my birthfather had died. I'm still sifting through how that feels, a unique kind of loss of a parent. Even though we reunited over 20 years ago, there was still a lot left unspoken, and maybe a lot that we didn't know or understand about each other. We met in-person twice. The first time was shortly after 9/11. I had his contact information for almost a year, but I wasn't ready to reach out. Knowing that he lived in New Jersey, so close to NYC where the towers fell, I felt a sense of urgency that I shouldn't waste any more time. I called on a Friday night. I left a voicemail that my name was Huyen and that I thought he had been a friend of my family in Viet Nam. The next morning, he returned my call.

In the first few seconds of our conversation, I said my name again, said who my birthmother was and said, "I think you may be my birthfather." Immediately, without any hesitation, he said, "I think I am, too." That was an enormous gift to me. No denial. No defensiveness. "I thought you and your mother had died."

He had been told by an army connection that my mother had died trying to make it to Thailand, and that I had died in the Babylift crash. He said he had wanted to marry my birthmother, but wasn't allowed to because her family had originally been from the North.

It felt so surreal to finally have this information, a little window into what had happened. Within a few weeks, I was headed to the East Coast with my adoptive father, my husband and my 17-month-old son in tow. I was about two months pregnant with my daughter at the time. My birthfather and his wife greeted us at a restaurant, with a hug and flowers in hand. After dinner, they were gracious and invited us home for cannoli and a chance to visit more.

At the house, I was excited to meet my half-sister, who was also the mother of a young son. My birthfather brought out a photograph of me, probably at about 2 years old, a pristine copy of a tattered photo that my birthmother's sister had held on to for 20 years in Viet Nam. We never did DNA testing; this picture that they had both saved was proof enough. My birthfather also gave me a gold cross that my birthmother had given to him before he left Viet Nam, to protect him on his way home. Similarly, when my birthmother took me to the Friends of the Children of Viet Nam in Saigon to relinquish me, she had



put a St. Christopher's medallion on a string and tied it tight around my neck, to protect me in my new life. Giving me the photograph and the cross felt generous and thoughtful.

Over the next decade, we checked in periodically by letters or telephone. By the time we would meet in person again, I was widowed, a single mother of two young adolescent children. Having lost my husband, I again felt some urgency in making sure that my kids would meet their biological grandfather. And again, my birthfather was gracious in saying yes to my request. Our visit was sweet and the kids thought he and his wife were fun and kind. Before we left, my birthfather gifted us with an ornate serving set that he had brought back with him from Viet Nam.

Following that visit, much of our communication happened through Facebook, with occasional comments on each other's posts. Facebook allowed us to see aspects of each other's lives in a very natural way. I got a tiny idea of his sense of humour, his love of fishing and model trains. Facebook also happens to be the primary way that I maintain contact with my birthmother; we FaceTime and she sees my posts and photographs.

I didn't want to post anything about my birthfather's death on Facebook until I had the opportunity to FaceTime my birthmother in Viet Nam to let her know. During that initial visit with my birthfather in 2001, he told my dad that my birthmother had been his first love. This was a gift to hear, even knowing the sad outcome for them, because in some way it validated my birthmother's faith that he would come back for us. She waited for eight years.

In my reunion video with my birthmother (five years before I found my birthfather), we are sitting at my grandparents' dining room table. She is beaming at me, with an arm around me, and laughing, she says, "Beaucoup love made you! Yeah, beaucoup love made you." When she looked at me, she saw him. She'd point to my features and say, "Same! Same!" It seemed to bring her joy, to see him in my face.

I was nervous to call her tonight to tell her the news. I asked my dear friend Suzie to join the call to help translate. I spoke in English, "My birthfather has died. X died. I am so sorry." And immediately, she let out a mournful cry. Even though my birthmother eventually married and had five more children—the foundation and joy of her life—my birthfather held a special place in her heart as her first love. For a year in their young lives, they had loved each other a lot.

Suzie helped to translate the details that I've heard before. It was wartime. There was nothing they could do to be together. 50 years later, my birthfather's passing is a loss to my birthmother. As a devout Catholic, she is praying for him now. There was a lot I didn't know about my birthfather, and I would still like to know more, but I can also be at peace with what I know.

For now, I'm staying grounded in the gratitude that I feel for having found him, gratitude that he recognised me, and gratitude for the opportunities that I had to connect with him and his family. I'm saying a prayer for his wife and family as they navigate this loss.

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## Georges Gilbert

*Born in Vietnam, raised in France*

I've been adopted in 1996 by French parents and my Vietnamese name is *Truong Vanlam*. I live in Noisy-le-Grand, a little Parisian suburb near the river Marne. I happily live with my cat and girlfriend.

My life in France (childhood to present) meant I've grown up in the countryside surrounded by medieval castles, fields and forests. It has not always been easy to be different in a place where Asian people were very rare to encounter. I was a shy kid but I was happy to have the love of my adoptive family and some friends. Later, I studied in Paris, a pluri-ethnic place with a lot of people from different origins. I have an interest in arts like theatre and cinema and I've started to develop short films with my friends. I am not shy anymore but creative and more confident.

My adoptive parents were very happy to see me for Christmas. They are retired and they don't leave their village very often like before. They try to help me as much as they can and are happy about my reconnection to my new found sister, Mikati. I trust and respect my adoptive parents and they trust me and respect me equally.

I teach cinema, video editing and graphics with Adobe suite to adults and teens. I'm making videos and one day, I hope to become a movie director.

It has been surreal, like a dream and a little bit frightening to be found by my sister because all my beliefs about my personal history are now unsure. The first days, I remember repeating again and again, "I've got an elder sister, I've got an elder sister". Then we started to talk and get to know each other more and it became more real. Now I'm very happy and proud to have Mikati as my sister. It's very strange because even though we met only two weeks ago, I feel like I have know her for a long time. For me, it's a new step in my life, the beginning of a journey where I will connect more with her, with Vietnam, where we will try to discover our family story, I hope.

Mikati is a strong and caring woman who is always trying to help others despite having encountered many difficulties in her life. She's very passionate, clever, funny and above all I respect and admire the person she is. We like to discuss many things from important subjects like international adoptions and smaller subjects like the life of our

respective cats or tv series or why Belgians are so proud to eat French fries with mayonnaise. I don't know why but I've quickly felt a connection with her. It could be because of our shared DNA but I think it's more probably because she is fundamentally fantastic as a person. I like to tease her a little sometime and she's very patient with me and my jokes! We've got our differences of course, but siblings always have differences. I'm very glad to have her in my life.

My determination to find my family in Vietnam has increased since I met my elder sister but I've always been curious to find more information about my biological mother and father. Growing up as an adopted child, I grew up with a perpetual mystery about my origins. It defines me, marking me forever because I'm always facing the fear of being rejected again. Like many adoptees, I grew up with this explanation: "Your first parents left you because of their poverty." This is speculation which may be true or not and we do not know until the facts are gathered. I feel no anger about that but I want to know the real motives, the real story from their point of view. Was it their decision or not....?

Mikati is really passionate and determined in this search and about our story and she told me about the real problems caused by some organisations which have seen international adoption as a business in the 1990s. I did research to gather information based on official and independent reports from the press and UNICEF and I talked to adopted people who have been in our orphanage. I'm worried about some testimonies, about the lack of transparency in the adoption process and to adoptive parents, adopted children and biological parents and now I want to be sure if our parents gave their consent or not. I'm also determined to discover this truth and to show our journey through a documentary in order give more information about what could have been problematic in international adoption in the 1990s to year 2000. I'm not alone in this quest ,my elder sister is with me and I'm with her.

I've never had the opportunity to return to Vietnam yet but it is something I hope to do in the near future. I'm sure it won't be only for fun and tourism!

You can follow Georges at [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) or [Youtube](#).

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## Trista Goldberg

*Born in Vietnam, raised in the USA*

*Founder of Operation Reunite*

I am a DNA influencer and consultant and founder of Operation Reunite after finding my Vietnamese birth family in 2001. I used DNA to verify my family's biological connection and verified that I'm half Vietnamese and half Finish. Over the last 20 plus years, I've helped to make DNA mainstream amongst intercountry adoptees. Operation Reunite became the beta pilot group to launch the autosomal DNA test in 2010. I've seen miracles that have been magnetised with DNA and the benefits of being able to connect to extended family. There are many blessings when you really know who you are and where you came from. This journey continues to pick up momentum as the 50th Anniversary of the Fall of Vietnam approaches and our network expands, shares and educates humanity to harness the technology of DNA. We are currently working with Holt International, an adoption agency, to create a training program not just for adoptees but for in-country staff and program directors. We have already created a lunch and learn webinar that created additional interest to expand the project. Vietnam and the Philippines will be the test pilots but eventually every country will be able to access the DNA training platform.

The general search process through Operation Reunite usually starts with an assessment which is done by phone when an adoptee decides to start a search. This gives us an idea of where they are from in Vietnam and any documents they might have. We look at whether the adoptee is open to taking a DNA test or if they already have one. We give suggestions where to start or if a search is in progress, we can point the person in the right direction and how to maximise their matches by uploading their DNA to various databases.

When embarking on a searching, creating several support systems to help navigate the journey is very important. Researching details about customs, cultural or anything that engages the adoptee about Vietnam. Gather documentation and ask adoption agencies for a copy of their file as well as request any information from key people involved (ex: adopted family, birth father is already found etc.)

What are some of the outcomes to expect:

Some people match with 3rd and 4th cousins right away and once you receive a 2nd cousin or closer match, you might be able to locate additional clues to a reunion. Some adoptees find details right away and others are still waiting for additional clues to lead to a match. It all takes patience, awareness and the ability to be open to learning. As we add more DNA to the Operation Reunite database, the possibility of a close match increases.

Some of the barriers to expect in searching include language barriers, time zone barriers, and financial barriers for the birth family. That is why we encourage adoptees and adoptive families to donate a DNA kit where you are willing and able to help. Emotional and trust issues are different for everyone so understanding the temperament of the adoptee is very important.

Some of the ethics to consider in searching that I recommend, are allow the adoptee to lead and never force or make the search journey about you, your organization or as an adoptive parent. Sometimes life gets busy, so understand that pauses will happen and those are healthy ways to allow the adoptee to process the journey in stages that are right for them.

The cost to search can depend on the DNA company or time of purchase. Usually, it costs around \$59-\$99 on most commercial DNA platforms, depending on sales and promotions. We are a 501(c)3 so there are not charges but donations are always welcome. We never turn away anyone that is financially challenged but we give birth family priority since they are getting older and are the most challenging to find.

Who to trust in searching can be tricky. Find a reputable organisation with a track record of ethical behaviour and seek testimonials from fellow adoptees. This in my opinion, is usually the best practice.

What DNA test you are using makes a big difference as well as if the raw data can be shared and uploaded. We use the autosomal DNA test because it can match up to 5 generations that can find both the maternal and paternal side of the family. MtDNA and Y are specific to the female and male lineage and limits a more general casting of a searching net. There are some cases where the last to test could help for specific cases, like if the father or mother passed away before the autosomal test began prior to 2010.

In terms of DNA results, the higher the cM the closer the match so if you have a high cM around 2000 plus you are getting closer to a birth parent and child match. We do this

for both Amerasians as well as adoptees, so there are a lot of cases where the father left Vietnam since their tour of duty was over and didn't know they even fathered a child.

I recommend the FamilyTree DNA test out of loyalty and also, we place all the Vietnamese birth mothers in that database. I find the results are much clearer and easier to understand than the other companies. We are also limited in time and resources, so FTDNA offers us larger discounts and access to test kits without prepaying the processing fee. This way we don't have to worry if a veil rolled away or tests get lost or stolen along the way. We are eventually going to have Catalyst Foundation volunteers help upload the raw data through GEDmatch to share with Ancestry and 23andMe.

The advantage of having an adoptee led search organisation is you know you can trust them based on the network and they can relate to the same issues because they are also adopted. Just be sure they have the longevity and experience to back up the credibility.

The government can help by allowing and approving larger DNA testing events and locations as well as helping us gain access to media to promote our projects to the families who have lost a child. The government can also assist if they have access to any details of the specific birth family that might lead to a match. Sharing and being willing to be transparent with whatever access is kind and good karma. No-one is competing for the final results but rather, I hope they help accomplish this since the birth families aren't getting any younger.

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# Johanna Graf

*Born in Peru, raised in Germany*

My name is Johanna. I was adopted from Peru to Germany when I was 3 months old. I help other adoptees to find their birth families in Peru. Actually it can be very easy if you're in Peru yourself, if not you really need the help of others.

One of the biggest barriers of course is the language. So I would recommend everyone who wants to search to at least try to learn basic sentences of their respective language. I didn't speak Spanish myself when I met my birth family. I didn't have a translator so it was really weird. I just understand a few sentences.

The best way to find help with your search is always the adoptee group of your birth country. Today, I guess every country has its own group on Facebook and this is really a big help.

My own search just had the cost of the taxi driver as I didn't use any services. If you look for your parents at the Reniec (registration office in Peru) it has a cost of about \$3. I would always recommend to look for help with other adoptees before hiring a private detective or an agency.

I also know that the Peruvian government has offered some help in searching for adoptees. I just know that one friend used this service and it worked. I guess it's free. This is the link: [Dirección General de Adopciones - Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables - MIMP](#). You just have to fill out a form.

I never did DNA search but I know adoptees who were successful with that. I guess it's also a great chance if you have no information about your birth family to know at least something about your original roots.

For myself, my search was really easy (I had an old address and was lucky enough that my half sister still lived there), so we basically just knocked on the door and the search was over. This was 16 years ago. I am now living in Peru for the past 12 years and my birth family and I grew really close like a real family.



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## Samara James

*Born in South Korea, raised in Australia*

When I first moved to South Korea back in 2008, I wasn't sure if I was ready to locate my birth family. How do you know whether you want to unlock the biggest mysteries of your life? How do you know if you are ready for it? For me, it was a curiosity, but for my Korean friends, they seemed determined to make the reunion a reality with an almost feverish determination. This is what really propelled the search for my birth family, and despite not really understanding what that would mean or preparing for what may happen, I agreed to do the search. Ann Babe, breaks down the attitudes toward gypops into three types. She described the first as, "A person that's older who is sort of angry about you being a Korean but not being fully Korean." There are the "people who seem flummoxed and simply incapable of grasping your background" but then there are also those who are "very friendly and helpful" but sometimes "overbearing when they try to convert you or reform you" (Wiggin, 2010). My Korean friend (who was also my boss) was this third type. As an older sister figure to me in Korea (or *unnie*) she took me under her wing and introduced me to Korean life; eventually the reunion between myself and my birth family became her personal mission. My adoptive parents were concerned about me locating my birth family. I knew they didn't really want me to do it. My mother used to watch movies about adoptees reuniting with their birth families and choosing to stay and live with them, as if they were horror movies, "You would never do that would you?" she used to ask me. I had always promised I wouldn't but when I asked for my adoption paperwork, I knew in a way I was betraying them.

My paperwork was scarce to say the least, a piece of paper with my parents' names dates of birth, the name I was issued by the adoption agency, and the province I was born in, translated into English that only led to dead-ends and we exhausted most of my options quickly. Leanne Lieth, founder of Korean Adoptees for Fair Records Access, explains, "Access to our Korean records is dependent upon whether the adoptee knows that there are duplicate or original records in Korea, that those records may have additional information... and that the adoptee has the will and tenacity to investigate across continents and languages with the often uncooperative and hostile Korean international adoption agencies. This process is arbitrary, inconsistent, and can drag out for years" (Dobbs, 2011). According to Dobbs (2011), "There are no laws sealing or regulating adoption files, which are technically agency private property. The agencies could burn the records if they wanted." Eventually, my friend convinced me to go on a

Korean reality TV show where adoptees can make a public plea for any information that may help to locate their families. Say your Korean name into the camera, she said. I had never used my Korean name before. "My name is Kim Soo-Im. If you have any information about my biological family" ... the rest was a blur. Before I knew it, we had found them.

After declining to film the reunion on air, we drove to meet my birth family. I had no idea what I was walking into, or even where we were. I didn't expect to have family, I thought I was an orphan but when I walked in the door, I was taken aback to see almost 20 relatives – mother, brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents who were all crying inconsolably. I didn't understand. My friend was so excited and I was completely at a loss for how to react. I didn't have any questions prepared, I think I was still in a state of shock. All I could think was, why couldn't I have stayed here? Why are they crying when they abandoned me?

My friend did the introductions in Korean, and it was only then I realised, she wouldn't be able to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between us. I struggled to understand most of what was said, but a few things came through. I looked like my father who had died a few years earlier. I guessed by my mother's age, that he may have been in his 40's at the time. They couldn't explain to me how he died exactly, but I inferred by their hand signals it was something to do with the chest – I hope it isn't hereditary. I was told that I have two siblings (who were also put up for adoption) and I was the last of the three children to reunite with the family. My brother who was there, didn't say anything to me that day. Apparently, he could speak English, but I guess chose not to. I have no idea what he was thinking or what his story was. My sister wasn't there, when I asked where she was, the reply was "she's gone". I couldn't figure out what 'gone' meant. Was she missing? Was she dead?

My birth mother plead with my friend to tell me that she regretted putting me up for adoption and that she tried everything to undo it. She didn't know I was sent overseas. My friend looked so overjoyed, but I wasn't sure what to say, I couldn't understand. I thought she didn't want me, I was told I had been abandoned after birth. I was prepared for rejection but regret, despair, shame, longing I didn't know what to do with. I sat there silently for what felt like hours, then the family asked if I was staying to re-join the family and asked if I would help take care of my ageing mother. Everyone was looking at me expectantly. It was at this point I felt something shutdown inside me, and I told them that I was going to go back to Australia. My birth mother asked if I would sleep over that night

and let her hold me. I declined. I wanted to enter that world, but I didn't know how. It's something that still haunts me. This part of my life had been closed for over 20 years, and for those moments when I opened it again, I didn't know what to do. I had never felt so useless, so I closed it again as quickly as possible and I haven't spoken to them again. This was 15 years ago.

Behar (1996) who talks about 'roots' and 'routes', asks how do you return to a home that is lost? How do you reckon with what you uncover? What are you really returning to? What does it offer? Digging through old paintings, I find a self-portrait from when I was a teenager. Half human and half tree, floating above a dark ocean. My roots are exposed and I'm crying the sea of tears that I'm floating above. If I was trying to replant my roots, I was experiencing transplant shock. I didn't know how to process what had happened. Returning to my office after our reunion, I found a large box of dried squid on my desk. "It's from your family, they really must love you" my friend exclaimed. I am still at a loss to what that means. What a cruel irony, I had spent my life trying to blend in with my peers in Australia, trying to belong as an Australian. It was all I ever wanted. But in those moments, I wish I could have been Korean. Korean enough to understand what my family was saying and the meaning and context behind it. Now I'm so Australian that it feels like I've locked myself out of that world.

15 years later, looking back from a point in my life where I realise the gravity of what I dug into and how it lingers in my subconscious as an unresolved part of my life. Now that I understand a little more about Korean culture, the adoption system, and the impossible choices my birth mother would have faced, I have finally come to a point where I want to try and reconnect with them again. I realise now that the birth family search is not about guaranteeing a fairy-tale ending, but it's about opening yourself to something. This time I'll go in with a completely open mind and heart, no expectations and an adoption specialising translator. I just hope my birth mother's still alive so I can properly meet her this time.

Samara James (Kim Soo Im)

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# Elizabeth Johnson

*Born in India, raised in the USA*

I am born in India, my crafted "birth certificate" (which has my adoptive last name) has the city written as Nill Check, but it is likely meant to be Neemchak, which is near Gaya. Or it could be Bhagalpur which is the city listed in my Indian passport. My Indian parents died when I was less than 4 years old, then I was sent to a Missionaries of Charity orphanage in Delhi, India in 1978. I lived there until I was adopted by an American family at 5 years old. I'm now 49 and am trying to locate any family in Nimchak or Neemchak near the city of Bhagalpore, India. My documentation said I had 3 sisters. Unfortunately I don't know their names.

After watching the movie "Lion", I felt inspired and hopeful to do a birth-family search. I reached out initially to the orphanage via email asking for records and the response was that there are no records because, "As per our records, you are an abandoned child who was left at the gate of Missionaries of Charity. No whereabouts of parents or siblings are mentioned. Since it is a very old case we have only the court paper with us."

Next, I decided to do 23&Me DNA test. Through it I've learned I have 60 distant (3rd - 5th) cousins. I reached out to all of them via 23andMe messages and heard from about half of them. Four of them keep in touch regularly. One cousin was in the same orphanage as I and we even overlapped for a few months and then grew up about 2 towns away from each other. We see each other occasionally. This makes me very happy to have found these relatives.

I have reached out to a few FB news outlets out of Bhagalpur, specifically at the links below to share my story and my photo:

I love Bhagalpur - Smart city of Bihar (they posted my story and photo in 2018)  
<https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/688967961113795>

Gaya City (they said they'd share my story but I don't think they did)  
<https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/487670797920980>

Bihar (I have not received any correspondence from them)

<https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/225368500044>

Bhagalpur city (I have not received correspondence from them)

<https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/1867416210172715>

Saroo Brierley (I have not received any correspondence from him)

Some barriers that prevented me searching before was I don't know my birth name or that of my family. My birth location is also uncertain. I have no real leads on where I should start my birth family search.

My adoptive family are informed and happy for me to find any relatives. They don't feel threatened and are not defensive. They embraced meeting my new Indian cousin.

I am trying to get in touch with local journalists from the Bihar area to see if they would write an article about me and have it published in the local paper to see if there might be relatives I could find. I am actively trying to establish a connection with a lawyer in Delhi that could go to the court archives and see if there is more information about me in any court documents, since I have a case number that I can reference.

I welcome hearing about others' search efforts and seeing if they've done something that I could also use.

I would like to find my 3 sisters! That would make me feel completely whole (even though I was raised with tons of love by my adoptive family).

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## Catherine Kearney

*Born in Malaysia, raised in Australia*

I was adopted from Malaysia as a new born baby by an Australian family. I started searching for my birth family as a young adult, emailing and ringing the adoption agencies I found on the internet and in the phone book, recommendations to try from some of the people I had been calling, all with no luck. Eventually, I was introduced to Lynelle and ICASN (now ICAV) which was a huge support for me at the time and still ongoing now. My supportive adoptive mother also introduced me to a Malaysian family who helped me in my search.

I decided to visit Malaysia for the first time with my partner (now husband). I went to visit the hospital I was born in and the area my adoptive family lived, I asked if anyone knew of my birth family but all with no success. With the help of my Malaysian family friend, I put an ad in two Malaysian newspapers about searching for my birth family. From this ad, a Malaysian friend of my adoptive mother contacted us. I also received contact from false people claiming to be my birth mother. During this time when I was searching and having no luck, it felt like so many doors closed on me and I experienced the feeling of rejection multiple times. I had to be emotionally strong and persistent during these times because the process was exhausting and emotional. Going through all this, trying to keep it altogether for work and family, it was hard and emotionally draining. I also struggled to share what I was going through with fellow adoptees and family.

After connecting with my mother's Malaysian friend, I gave up on my searching. Approximately 10 years later, I received an email from Lynelle stating that a new service via International Social Services (ISS) Australia was funded to help adoptees search for their birth families. I read and re-read the email from Lynelle, thought about it multiple times, lost some sleep over it, and wondered did I want to go through this all over again? I eventually decided yes, so I replied to the email. I did pause before sending it but I sent it.

ISS Australia had no luck finding anything, doors closed again even though I had an identity number for my birth mother. It was looking like ISS Australia couldn't help me but suddenly, we had success and we found my birth family.

I have a birth mother, 1 brother and 2 sisters. This was amazing news but I had not planned what to do next. I contacted my birth family who speak very little English. My family in Australia were worried for me. It became a roller coaster of emotions as I tried to uncover were they my real family. I asked for a DNA test. They could not understand why I wanted a DNA test. I eventually went to Malaysia to meet with them and do the DNA test which came back positive. I used the swab test method which was sent to a DNA company that ISS Australia used at the time. This method is expensive and accurate.

I am still in contact with my birth family but due to the language barrier, communication is difficult. Sometimes I have felt sad not knowing what they are thinking and too scared to ask, in case I offend them and they stop communicating with me. Slowly over time, I am getting to know them more and finding answers to my questions. I have questions like: what my birth mother and siblings interests and personalities are, what my life may have been like, what their lives were like growing up?

Finding my birth family has helped me find my own identity. I found out my birth brother had tried searching for me at the request of our birth mother but he didn't know where to begin. My birth mother didn't recover from giving me up for adoption and suffered mental health issues. If only we had found each other earlier. Maybe through my adoption process, if both families had exchanged contact details, perhaps our lives would have been very different.

The costs associated with searching for my birth family were supported by ISS Australia whom I recommend (although they are no longer funded to do intercountry adoption searches) and they have a connection with ICAV, so the trust factor is there. Trust can be a huge issue when searching because as an adoptee, we don't know who to trust when paying for services. The costs out of my own pocket were substantial because intercountry searching involves a trip overseas, international phone calls, translation costs and counselling. I highly recommend counselling because searching is emotionally draining and it's good to unpack these emotions.

Good resources I recommend are the government department or organisations in your current adoptive country. Government departments or organisations in your country of birth are good but can be a headache. To source a copy of my birth certificate, I was told by the Malaysian consulate in Australia I would have to give up my Australian citizenship to get one. Maybe it's easier to go the Malaysia and try and that may also



involve asking someone in Malaysia to help, which of course means language barriers exist. I wish our government departments were more helpful in these processes.

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## Li Ki

### *Born in Thailand, raised in the USA*

My life has always been a mystery ever since I can remember. The who, what, when, why and how have stuck with me as I'm sure it has been for many adoptees. It's been a challenge for my search. Always, ups and downs like an emotional rollercoaster. Then I usually hit a brick wall. I still continue to search but my motivation at this point has slowed down. Now, at 50 (give or take) I'm not sure how I feel anymore. Even if I want to give up, there is that little voice inside that says, "Don't Give Up!" Life goes on and things get in the way but you never forget. It's a void that lingers within. Not knowing is the hardest part. I want to know the good and the bad. I believe I have that right as well as other adoptees out there. I understand the hurt. The wound never really heals. It's always there.

Here is my story. I was supposedly born in 1972 but I am not really sure. I was born in Thailand and I was very sick at the age of 18 months to 2 years old. I was only 13 pounds and dying of malnutrition. I have one document to be true. It says I was from Sadao, Southern Thailand. I was from a fatherless family and the youngest of 7 children. My 5 year old sibling died of starvation and I was going next. I was from the jungle and my birth mother gave me up due to poverty.

A Thai doctor received me somehow and brought me to his hospital that he owned in Bangkok. I became better and he brought me to his house. The doctor was married to an American wife. She would be the one who would help put me up for adoption.

In 1974, my adoptive parents were stationed in Utapao, Thailand during the Vietnam War. My father was in the Air Force. They couldn't have children and before they moved to Thailand, they applied to adopt in the United States.

One day, my adoptive mother was shopping at the base Commissary. She was chatting with a lady over prices of meat and this lady says she just adopted a Thai baby girl. My mother then said she would love to adopt but they were leaving in a few months to go back to the United States and surely there would be no way to organise an adoption in that time. Later, while my mother was checking out her shopping items, this lady comes running back in and gives my mom a number. There is another Thai baby girl available for adoption. Of course my mother calls the number. The lady asks a bunch of

questions about my adoptive mom and dad and soon after, she sends a car to pick my mom up. My mother was told I was very malnourished and wasn't responding to anyone. There was a Dutch couple coming to see me in the morning and if they didn't want me then they can show me to her. They put my mother into a hotel suite that was owned by the doctor. The next day, the Dutch couple wanted a boy. They placed me in my adoptive mother's arms and I responded right away. They knew I should go with her.

My mother took me back to my father on the base and a few days later, my father was asked by the doctor to buy a bottle of whiskey to bribe the Consulate so they could get me adopted in Thailand and get me a visa to go to the United States. That didn't work because my dad didn't want to do that because he was in the military and he didn't want to lie or bribe. At the time, my parents were too young of age in Thailand to be able to adopt me. The doctor was really mad at my father and the Consulate said the only way is to get consent from the birth mother in writing. So, that's what they did. The doctor set up a lunch with my biological mother and my father had to pay for her travels from the South. The restaurant was outside of Bangkok and all they spoke was Thai. My father had no idea what they were saying. My biological mother signed the forms. My adoptive father and mother were able to get me a visa and we left Thailand. I was adopted in the United States and became an American Citizen when I was 6 years old.

Ever since I can remember, I always wanted to know. I never had a doubt. When I turned 18 years old, I decided to search. It was time. I had 2 documents. One document stating that I was 18 months old with a fatherless family from Sadao, Thailand and 13 days later another document created which was a birth certificate in both English and Thai. The birth certificate says I have a mother and a father and I am from Bangkok. Both documents didn't match up.

I decided to call the number on the letterhead from the hospital. I remember pacing back and fourth looking at the phone, staying up all night so it would be morning in Thailand. Not really sure what to say, I called a couple of times and hung up. Finally, I did it and I asked for the doctor and was put on hold. I remember my heart beating out of my chest. Finally, a man came on the phone. I don't even remember what I said but I blurted everything out. He said, he wasn't around at the time but knew someone who was. So he put me back on hold again. A British lady came on the phone. She said her name was Mrs. Bee. She told me that my parents didn't want me and that's why they gave me up. If they wanted me, they would have kept me. I should be happy and hung up. I was crushed! I remember I cried that whole night. I didn't want to search anymore. I was done.

Time went by and all the anger I felt made me push myself to search more and harder. I didn't care anymore. I decided to look into my birth certificate. I looked up people with the names on my documents. Remember, this was back in the early 90's so there was no internet at that point. I literally called the operator and would ask for the last names in Thailand. I would get nothing for a while and then one day I got a hit. I got a person with the same last name and a phone number. I remember I just wanted to call but I couldn't speak Thai. At the time I had a friend who spoke Thai and between her and I, we were able to communicate. We happened to get a cousin who recently just got married and she was going to change her last name but she didn't. Thank god or I wouldn't have ever found them. She gave us numbers to call. When I called, the first thing they asked me was am I Malai or Mali? My Birth name on my birth certificate is Malai. I was confused. I said Malai. I asked, who is Mali? Mali was supposedly my younger sister. At first this family said yes they are my family. Then they told me no they are not. They just signed as my biological parents. They were paid to do it. They told me to call back in 2 weeks and they will track down my real family because they were neighbours at one time.

Around the same time I happen to be in touch with the doctor as I had found him by calling the operator too. I spoke with the doctor and he told me to send him my information. I prepared pictures and all my documents, then I waited and waited. Finally, I called back after a couple of weeks and I could hear he had not even looked at my information. I could hear him opening the envelope. He said my parents are in heaven and told me to be happy.

I then spoke to his wife. She was very defensive and threatened me with a lawyer. She did say they put up 40 children to adoption and they would have their cooks and maids sign off as biological parents. They would pay them with gifts. She warned me not to contact the people on my birth certificate because they will take advantage of me. She said the person who dropped me off to them walked away into the sunset. She said she was the one that named me Malai. My heart was failing at the time. She also said I just needed to be happy, that I'm lucky and special!

So what did I do after that? I did exactly what she warned me not to do. I contacted the family on my birth certificate again. They said they found my family! I was so excited. They said my older sister passed away in a car accident and my father had already passed away too. He was hit by a truck crossing the road. He was a terrible alcoholic after getting out of jail. He went to jail because he was at a bar and a man attacked him with a gun and

he stabbed him 20 times. He spent a good amount of time in jail and got out early. My mother was still at large. No-one knows where she went. Apparently she left me in the hospital.

I wrote to the Bangkok Post and they did an article on me. I tried putting out information to find these people but I had no luck. I decided to hire a private investigator and spent \$800. Sure enough they found them! They found my aunt and uncle on my father's side. My aunt took care of my sister and myself. I connected with them and they knew the doctor. They told me I was born premature and then they took me home. They put me up for adoption through the doctor. My aunt had 7 children of her own plus my sister. They were trying to take care of me but I became ill. It all made sense. They sent pictures through email of my mother, father and sister. This was the early 2000's. It took awhile to download and I remember watching these pictures coming in little by little. Starting with the top of the picture and waiting for the rest. It was so exciting to actually see my biological family for the first time. When I saw the picture of my mother there was no doubt. We had so many features that were alike. I would write to them for a while and speak to them over the phone with the help from my friends who spoke Thai.

I decided to plan a trip to meet them. I planned it over 1 year. I took classes on how to read, write and speak Thai. I bought gifts and even set up a bank account for them as I knew they were poor and I wanted to give back. I could deposit money for them when they needed it. This was because my aunt and uncle took care of my sister and myself for a little while.

I found myself flying around the world, 22 hours on a plane. Excited, nervous and just amazingly grateful. I finally found them. They wanted to meet with me and I would finally learn about who I was. Malai!

I landed and I was extremely tired and hot! The next day I was in the lobby of the hotel and some man came up to me and asked me something I didn't understand. I just said no to ignore him. He walked away and then it dawned on me he had said the word "Malai". I tapped his shoulder and said, "I'm Malai". He spoke broken English but between my broken Thai, we figured out I had the right family. I got in the car with him and his son who was 10 yrs old. They took me to a flat with a lot of dogs in the front yard. There were a lot people in the street waiting for me. I had an entourage! I went in and I met my aunt and uncle. There were lots of people sitting around and they were all staring at me. We were waiting for my cousin who spoke English. He lived about an hour away.

Finally, he came and they explained that all these people were my cousins and the 10 year old boy was my nephew, my sister's son. I was so happy! That night I slept at my cousin's house who lived an hour away and I met his family.

I woke up the next day to the birds chirping and the beautiful smells and sounds of Thailand. I felt like I was home. I was on cloud 9! They took me everywhere. Shopping, the temple where my sister had her funeral, and the flat where they all grew up and I lived for a little while. When we were at the flats, the neighbour opened the door and it happened to be the family on my birth certificate. My cousin spoke Thai to them and I remember him putting his finger to his lips and said shhhhh.

Finally, it was time for me to go home. I flew back with an amazing story. My adoptive parents were so supportive throughout this. They always had my back. My parents would even celebrate my "Happy Adoption Day". But my adoptive family just didn't believe everything and I remember my mom saying, "But you were from the jungle?" She had her suspicions and I didn't blame her. She remembers what she remembers and to her it didn't add up. I didn't want to hear it. I had a new birth date now. I was 6 months younger which made sense. Everything just matched up. My aunt and uncle gave me pictures of them with the doctor. I felt like I had enough evidence. I was convinced. I went on for a few years believing everything. I had a whole new identity.

I started to receive letters in Thai. I had my friends read them and it was my family asking for money. I checked the bank account I set up for them and they had overdrawn all the money. Finally, they called to tell me my aunt was very sick and she needed a blood transfusion. They were asking for \$8000 or she will die. I remember hanging up the phone and crying knowing I couldn't do it. When I was there, she had already had a stroke. I bought her a wheelchair, medication, food and reading glasses. What more did they want. They said they withdrew the money because they were getting evicted. All this was just getting to me. My Thai friends would say I flashed my money around and in Thai culture, whoever in the family is richest, it's expected to help out the family. As I am American, they look at me as having a lot of money. I got it. I shouldn't have paid for all those things. I guess I was trying to give back in some sort of way but in the end it looked like I was flashing my money around. I was hurt and devastated.

Around this time DNA was becoming more available so I hired a lab in Thailand to do DNA with my nephew. I paid another \$800. When the results came back there was a

zero match! I was devastated! They took me for everything. My money, my emotions and my time. Literally, back to square one!

I had a search angle confront them and they said they had a family member who was given up for adoption and thought it was me. The further we dug the more information came out. I went back to the people on my birth certificate. I did DNA with them and zero match. The people on my birth certificate said they knew I wouldn't give up searching and felt sorry for me so decided to say it was their old neighbour. They never thought I would go this far to find them. When they saw me at the flats, that's when my cousin told them to keep quiet.

Since then, I have done DNA on all the most popular platforms. Nothing but 3rd cousins. Some cousins are also adopted. I have gone back to Thailand again with my family. I met with the people on my birth certificate. I have searched for Mali. I have found her on the Thai government database. The same family on my birth certificate that signed for me also signed for her. I am still in search for her. I would like to find the 40 other children this doctor and his wife put up for adoption. As for the fake family I met in Thailand, I still happen to be friends on Facebook with them. I'm no longer angry at them. Who knows, the girl they said I could have been, may have been sitting there staring at me on the couch while we were waiting for my cousin who spoke English. They took me but I was too giving, vulnerable and naive. I hope I did a good thing for them. I don't wish them any bad. I've moved on, I'm no longer naive. Lesson learned for sure!

I now just hope every time I get a notice I have a new DNA cousin, it will be closer than a 3rd cousin. I have accepted that maybe I will never know. The older I get, the more chances people will be pass on. It's hard to search for myself over there when I don't know my real name or birth date. Even who I thought I was, isn't. I even named my daughter Malai.

Time flies in life and I can't let it consume me. I still want to know the who, what, when, why and how. It will always be there. It will never go away. The one thing I do know is who I am today no matter who I was before. Who I was growing up has made me who I am today. I'm Lisa, a Thai adoptee. I'm a mother to 1 son and 2 daughters. They are all adults. I will soon to be a grandmother. I am happily married. I became really good at finding other adoptees and their families. I learned what to do and not what to do. I've helped countless adoptees and their families over 20 years. I also became a private

investigator. The United States is easier to search within because they keep records. Learning how to search and trace and using DNA is key.

I understand the hurt and the wanting to know. Knowing my hurt is also about finding my purpose in life. That's why I help others get their closure even though I know I might never have mine. I know I'm happy and I know I'm lucky! No-one has to tell me that, adoptees already know this. We just want to know the truth.



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## Alicia L

*Born in Colombia, raised in the USA*

The preparation for the search has been lifelong and it has involved learning and understanding what adoption is for myself, other adoptees, adoptive families and first parents on an individual level and with institutional global systems. As I got older, I was able to understand the complexities of people and the governments involved. I was able to build a solid foundation due to the openness of my adoptive parents. I was told my adoption story since I was an infant and my adoptive parents were consistently vocal in their support for what I needed from them for searching, if I decided to do so.

I joined and later became an administrator of a Colombian adoptee group where I connected with other adoptees on and offline and heard their stories about their adoption and reunion experience. Through that, I had a better real-world idea of what one can expect or not expect while searching and finding one's family.

I read books on trauma, grief, and loss as well as began therapy which all helped reconcile the in-between feeling of not belonging fully to any group, trauma of family separation, loss of language and culture and mentally prepared me for what was to come.

The only barrier, so to speak, was my readiness to search. I had all of my paperwork which turned out to be authentic. I had the means to hire a searcher and had the support of my friends and family.

I found my search organisation through the Facebook group, *Adopted From Colombia*. Before engaging a search organisation, I considered the past experience and testimonials of other adopters that used Colombia Tu Pias.

Adoptees and adoptive parents will inevitably have a range of feelings about the decision to search, the search process, and reunion if it occurs. These are things that one cannot predict and if there is a tenuous relationship to begin with, many things can break down. A family therapist specialising in adoption/reunion/grief is ideal to walk everyone through the experience. Adoptive parents should not put their insecurities about the process onto their children and/or expect their children (even if adult) to help them with emotional labor, as the adoptee will be dealing with their own processing.

Adoptive parents/families should do their own work ahead of time. There may be guilt and shame that arises when confronted by the fact that your child is about to meet blood-related people and possibly have a relationship with them. It is completely normal for an adoptee to love their current life while at the same time, hold the feeling they wish they were never adopted.

I believe it cost me around \$1,500 dollars for my search. For my particular case, the cost was high as it was a quick online search and then a visit to confirm. However, I do understand a flat rate as many searches are more in-depth and can take weeks and months.

The service and support I have received post search has been invaluable. My search organisation have provided translation services that includes navigating complicated cultural and family systems issues. I have been working with them on and off for ten years. I use people and services that have a proven track record in searching and finding other adoptees families.

I used paper search methods and it was easy to confirm the information. For me, my information was true however, many adoptees find the names and/or cedula numbers are fake. I looked up the voting information using the cedula number I had from paperwork and found the name matched. I also found the cedula and name matching while doing another search, so I knew that as of a certain year my mom was alive.

From my experience the best thing you can do as an adoptee who is searching, is make sure your mental wellness is in order before searching. Talk to other adoptees who have reunited and find out their experiences. Read books on trauma and loss. Find an adoption-informed therapist or at least a therapist that specialises in trauma and loss. Understand that the decisions made by the adults while you were a baby/child were out of your control. Their actions do not define you as a person.

The answers you seek may not ever come and even when you do get answers, there will more than likely be further questions that arise after that. It is okay to reunite and then need to establish boundaries or even cut out first family. It is not a failure to do so. Also be prepared for any boundaries from your first family. They need time to process things and for some, the trauma and shame of separation may be too much to bear.

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## Sonia Marinescu

### Born in Romania, raised in Germany and the USA

It was 1991 in Timisoara, Romania when I was born. I was adopted from a Romanian Orphanage two years later first to Germany then to America. Most would say I was fortunate. In some ways yes but my story is marred, and my adoption was not a rosy one. I eventually took my name I was born under and what identity I could but that is neither here nor there. What I am sharing in this paper is my search for my family.

At first, it was great. I found my birth mom. Vali Nas found her. It was costly. \$700 American is expensive in Romania. It took a while and she did refuse a DNA test. My brother would write. A half-brother was found through a former adoptee. My birth father was the best man I ever had the fortune to speak with in poetry and words. I was soon supposed to meet him, but he passed. This resulted in my birth mom choosing to break contact. Especially after I mistakenly married a female. I have spent countless hours since trying to find my mom and I am hoping one day she will come back.

Finding family is not easy. There are language barriers. Romanian is not a language I speak. I needed a translator just to talk to my mom. The emotions were the hardest. While she cried, I was confused. I did not know what to feel or how to react. I still do not. Now, I am using The Never Forgotten Children of Romania Facebook group. I am hoping someone I have not met will come around.

Family is important to me and the hole where it sits is missing. All I can do is hope. But for what I found; it was certainly a whirlwind with limited support on how to even process the timeline. It was something I had to do on my own but luckily, I am used to this. My advice to adoptees wanting to find family is make sure you have a good one in place before you do. If it is chosen, that is still family. It is better to feel less alone while you search especially if it ends in rejection.

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## Desiree Maru

*Born in the Philippines, raised in the USA*

I was born in destitute poverty in the Philippines in 1985 and hence relinquished to an adoption agency on the day that I was born. I was taken care of at Asilo de la Milagrosa, in the care of Catholic nuns who were social workers at the time, and adopted via Holt International to the USA when I was about two years old. I did not know my adoptive parents, nor did they come out to the Philippines to get to know me. My name legally changed, and I was flown from an airplane and delivered to Caucasian strangers that were my legally binding family.

I grew up in Wisconsin, in the Midwest, and had an adopted brother, who was two years older than me, who was also adopted from the Philippines, from a different orphanage. We grew up not being taught about the Philippines. We grew up with a lack of pride or understanding of our home culture, heritage, customs and language. Instead we were heavily assimilated into the Western culture; we were asked a few times about our culture from our adoptive parents but it wasn't enough support to keep us connected to our home traditions.

Barriers included a lack of being informed from our adoptive parents about our homeland, ancestry and we also lacked emotional-psychological support for intercountry adoptees in the Midwest at the time. I vaguely remember a time when my adoptive mother sat me down in the living room, back in Wisconsin, she told me I was adopted, and I said, "I know," and walked out of the living room. I went back to my bedroom to be by myself. That's the tone of my childhood, where I was showing like I didn't care when in fact, the whole experience was difficult for me. But I didn't know how to reach out or talk about it to anybody.

My brother had a lot of issues and we moved to Arizona in high school to try to start over as a family. This is a time when my adoptive mother came into my bedroom and showed me my biological papers. She said she had to wait until I was 18 to give these to me, but I was close enough to the age, or something along those lines. She left, and I looked at them and I cried. I saw the name of my birth mother, and I longed to know more about her.

I imagined my birth mother a lot in those days. I wrote poetry, and it was never enough to fill the gap and missing pieces of my heart.

**Obstacles in searching at the time was that my biological papers, which had been established by social workers in the Philippines, didn't preserve much of *any* functional information** for independently searching for family members or family history. These biological papers lacked any kind of suitable, identifiable information that preserved in any way my heritage and family tree information, which would be necessary to piece together my past without needing the very individuals to re-establish the knowledge of my heritage.

My biological papers revealed next to nothing about my father, which later on, I would find that the information that was volunteered by my birth mother was also false. But as a teenager, when all I have are these old, governmentally-certified papers from my home country, *that's all that I had*. So these old-fashioned, brittle documents were my only hope, which were papers that scarcely were able to certify my birth on thin, fragile paper. I had a feeding schedule from my orphanage and a mighty, descriptive report of what I looked like and acted like as a vulnerable baby in the orphanage. And that was all I had of my entire past. These artefacts showed I was just a product of the adoption process.

I finally decided to pursue a reunion when I was in my mid-twenties. I discovered that Holt International actually had a search and reunion department, so I emailed them, and started the process. They reached out to my old orphanage, Asilo de la Milagrosa, and the kind social workers there had found my files. They also went themselves to the address of my birth mother, and thankfully, she still lived there. From that point, they coordinated with her.

I planned a trip to the Philippines with barely enough funds to cover this at the time. It was difficult because my adoptive mother wasn't supportive at all, and nobody from my adoptive family supported me either. But in a few months, I was able to create an itinerary. I was to leave Seattle, to the Philippines, and I was given a place to stay with the Intercountry Adoption Board of the Philippines, and later, Asilo de la Milegrosa had guest quarters too.

The cost of a reunion is plenty. The cost of travel is hefty. But the main cost to consider is the toll of what you're undergoing psychologically and emotionally. You've spent all your life fabricating an identity away from this place, and now you're returning,

and you're having to break out of that safety net to acknowledge and face parts of your past that had been concealed all this time. So it is disruptive to the security in our lives. It is a risk one takes as well, because you don't know the results, and how you'll process the experience post-reunion either.

The outcome of this search was that I was unknowingly able to have a reunion granted for me, with my birth mother and half-birth brother, due to all of these circumstances leading up to this being uniquely favourable and available to me at the time.

My reunion was in 2012, and it is now 2023 and I'm living on my own in Indiana. My adopted brother recently passed away last year, homeless on the streets of the Philippines, in 2022. He lacked much needed support throughout his whole life, which will always weigh on me, and I miss him everyday. I don't talk with my adoptive family anymore, although I had kept in touch with my adoptive parents and grandparents mainly. I just have one surviving adoptive grandfather now as well, so life has changed even in their circumstances.

After experiencing the whole search and reunion process, I do have my own perspectives to share. I think what is needed is that every adoption company and governmental organisation should have a search and reunion department for all adoptees to utilise.

Every adoption agency and birth country of an orphaned or vulnerable child **should be collecting all of their biographical information** *including family trees and family members*, so that they can have the knowledge of their past to utilise for their own personal purposes. Adoptees should have a right to have their family history preserved and safeguarded, administratively. Their biographical information, *including* birth information and birth records, needs to be preserved as best as possible, and social workers should make sure that all information is accurate and not in fact made up.

This biographical information is what holds the last of an adoptee's own cultural identity and historical background, and even medically, this is paramount. This information could give a sense of security and psychological support if anything, which could save society a lot of issues in the long run. It would hold well in the search and reunion process because the more information adoptees are given, the more options

adoptees have for meeting or getting to know their home countries in ways that are comfortable for them.

**Supportive resources** include the adoption agencies free search and reunion administrative support, biological paper filing and holding for the adoptee; it is giving an adoptee full access to their records at any time as well. Intercountry adoption boards or agencies of the home country, and the orphanage that the adoptee was cared for at, all need to be officially accountable. They all need to have proper records of the vulnerable child, and proper process and procedures for the search and reunion. Support should be accessible on a regular basis.

**There should be rapid communication readily available for adoptees today** such as having proper email addresses, current phone numbers and customer service at hand. Support should be granted such as places to stay when the adoptee visits the home country and on a reunion; they should be informed of the reunion process, given counselling support, translator support, and if someone can document the reunion for the adoptee, that could help too.

Now in 2023, after all these years of living life, pursuing therapies, working and becoming the owner of my own life, I've decided to start a new chapter of my search and reunion by requesting a MyHeritage DNA Kit for starting an initial search for biological relatives, and to also learn about my DNA heritage, and where I come from. This DNA kit was free due to the program in place recently, which was why I'd participated in requesting this kit.

The difference in this is that before, I would say, I experienced more of a direct line to my poverty-stricken past at Asilo de la Milagrosa, where in my mid-twenties, I met my birth mother and half birth-brother in 2012. Now, it is simply nice to search in a more discovery-toned, self-paced way, versus having to respond to a critical need to grasp the truth of what happened to me as a vulnerable baby and understand why my mother gave me up when I was born.

In this DNA search, I don't have to ask too many hard questions, although even to this day, some questions can still linger in my mind from time to time: Why didn't my biological family contact me all this time? Why wasn't I able to mend the fabric of my biological family history at a certain point in my life? And, why did my past have to be such a void?



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## Marta Persson

*Born in Colombia, raised in Sweden*

My name is Marta Nelly and I have my name from my birth country Colombia in South America. I was adopted in 1984 and was almost four years old when I came to Sweden, in the north of Europe. I always knew I was adopted and I had a lot of questions about where I came from and who my family was. Some of the questions my parents could answer but most of them, not. Since I was about seven years old I wanted to know more about who I was and where I came from and I decided then that I would try to find my family sometime in the future.

After a tough childhood and teenage years I was definitely sure that I wanted to search for my roots. About 20 years ago, I made some attempts but I found it hard to do it myself and I didn't want to involve my adoptive parents, so the years went by without any more search attempts. Once the pandemic hit and I was spending a lot of time on the sofa with my five month old baby girl, I decided I could search while sitting there. I felt I was in a little bit more of a stable period of my life. I had a new supportive partner, two biological kids and so much more tools like social media and smartphones to help me. For me, there was also the extra push because world wide investigations had started regarding illegal adoptions, to and from several countries in the world. I felt it was time for me to start for real this time. This was in October of 2020. The question was: where do I start?

I got the tip from my adoptive brother to call the Colombian embassy in Stockholm and got some information about my biological father, whose name I had in my adoption documents. Throughout the search period, I had contact with the embassy because they had good facts about my birth country and knew how long it could take to get information from different institutions.

During the time when the embassy was looking for information about my biological parents, I emailed the Swedish Central Authority to ask for my adoption file. During the wait I created a Facebook page with my birth names. I noticed this made it easier to get in and stay in contact with people in Colombia. During the month of October, I searched a lot for information in different groups and forums on Facebook and the internet. I didn't learn more knowledge about my biological parents from the embassy.



When the month came to an end, I had messaged a lot of people on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and chat groups. I didn't learn any new facts from my Swedish adoption file. I noticed I needed some help from someone that lived in my birth country to get some information on how to proceed. I got in contact with a Swedish guy that lives in Colombia who helped me with the language and some of the processes. I paid him and this was the only thing I needed to pay for during my search. Every other document or service, I didn't need to pay for.

The guy that helped, advised me to get my adoption file from the adoption agency in Colombia. Usually that will take months but I only needed to wait two weeks and I got a little information about my first years of life. My search on Facebook started to give some leads in the second month of searching. I got my baptism papers which listed the names of my biological dad, mom, grandparents and godparents. It was so relieving because I had more or less been eating, sleeping and breathing the search for my biological family for almost two months. Finally, I could see them - the names I wanted to see for so many years.

Once I had their names and the years when they were born, it was so much easier to search. I kept on searching during the end of the year 2020 and my contact in Colombia talked to people who might have further information.

It was the evening before New Years Eve and my husband, the kids and I were buying some last minute things. I received an audio message and my contact in Colombia listened to it and said it was probably my aunt. I was so happy! My aunt (my moms sister), my contact and I had a call together when I came home later that evening. She had seen my message on Facebook that I had sent some days earlier. She verified who I was, who my father was and told me I had 9 siblings and that my biological mom is still alive. Sadly, I learnt that my biological dad passed away some years earlier. After the call with my aunt, my contact and I then called my mom and it felt so good to hear her voice and know she was feeling okay. After that, I talked to three of my five sisters. It was so much fun and such a joy! It was all so unreal and so joyful!

Now, two and half years later we are still in contact, I have re-learned Spanish so I can talk to them. I have contact with my biological mom and my sisters every day! We are now a part of each other's daily life. And on the day, two years after I had the first contact with my biological family, my family and I started the travel to my birth country and my biological family. I finally was able to hug and talk to my mom face to face! It felt like pure

happiness. We had good, loving and fun days there together and we are now planning for our next trip, so we can get some more quality family time together. I never thought I would come to this point in my life but it would never have happened if I hadn't started the search for my roots.

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## Shelley Rottenberg

*Born in China, raised in Canada*

I was adopted from Zhejiang, China to Ontario, Canada in 1996 when I was 8 months old. In one of my adoption documents, it says, "Our institution has looked for her parents and relatives by all means, but no trace can be found." To this day, I still know nothing about my biological family.

About 5 years ago I decided to act on my growing curiosity about my birth family. While I know the odds of finding them are very slim, especially because I don't have any information to go on, I couldn't help but at least try. The first step was a 23andMe DNA ancestry kit, gifted to me by my mom as a Christmas present. I carefully read the instructions in the box to make sure I did everything correctly, then sent off my saliva sample. My sister, who is also an adoptee from China, did one too. And then we waited.

I remember being eager to get the results back because of the hope of having a DNA match with someone else in their database. At the time, the waiting period was about 6-8 weeks. Though after 2 months, instead of my results, I got an email with the subject line, "Your 23andMe Analysis was unsuccessful." I was told that "the concentration of DNA was insufficient to produce genotyping results." Luckily, I was sent a replacement kit and got a second chance to submit another saliva sample. Having followed the instructions correctly the first time, and without any further guidance on how to do things differently, I repeated the same steps and sent my sample once again.

After another long 2-month wait, my heart sank as I read the same email subject line as the last one. Except for this time, they would not be sending me another replacement kit. The email explained that because of "the second low DNA failure" and there being "no additional steps that would increase the chance of success," a full refund would be available to me. I was shocked and saddened by the news and confused too. I had done the exact same thing as my sister, yet she received her results back after the first attempt.

When I told a friend about the situation, she suggested I lightly chew my inner cheeks before spitting into the tube because buccal cells have a higher concentration of DNA. Determined to give it one last shot, I purchased another 23andMe ancestry kit with the refund they gave me and followed my friend's advice. The saying, "third time's a

charm” held true in these circumstances because, after another 2 months, my third sample was a success!

All this waiting only heightened my anticipation, which probably contributed to my slight disappointment when I saw that I had no close relative DNA matches. It’s been 5 years now, and while I have over 900 distant relatives, all with less than 1% DNA shared, the number of close relatives is still zero. I have also since uploaded my raw data to GEDmatch and still no luck.

Another search method I’ve tried is adding my information to a birth family search poster specific to the province I was adopted from. I did this 3 years ago through International Child Search Alliance (ICSA), a volunteer group of adoptees and adoptive parents. Their province search posters are shared widely on Chinese social media and in the past, they partnered with Zhejiang Family Seeking Conference and ZuyuanDNA for an in-person event.

Getting my information added to the poster took about 3 months, partly because of the time it took me to make a WeChat account, gather the necessary information, and translate some of my adoption paperwork. The other reason for the timing was that ICSA’s update schedule for province search posters is three times a year.

Through the WeChat group for my province, I was able to connect with a woman from Zhejiang who wanted to help overseas adoptees. With great thanks to her, I was able to get my information on Baobei Huijia (Baby Come Home), a Chinese site run by volunteers to help find missing children.

I learned of GEDmatch, ICSA and Baobei Huijia through the online adoptee / adoption community, which I discovered across various Facebook groups in 2018. Connecting with other adoptees and adoptive parents who are further along and more experienced in the birth family search journey has been extremely helpful.

My mom has also been a huge help in her own efforts of searching for resources and information about birth family searching. Though most of all, her complete support for me throughout this process is what matters most. She hopes that I can find my biological family and relatives because she knows how important it is to me.

We have discussed taking the next step of hiring a root finder or searcher. Though once I began to seriously consider this method, it didn't seem like the right time. One searcher that my mom had reached out to in 2020 said that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, foot traffic was not as high as it used to be, and therefore paying for physical posters to be distributed in my city or province in China may have even lower chances of bringing about any success.

Also, the process of hiring a searcher or organisation seemed quite daunting to me because it is hard to know whom to go with and which services to pay for. Packages greatly differ in terms of how in-depth the search process is and prices can easily be hundreds of dollars. And at the end of the day, the odds of finding my birth family, even with professional help, are very low.

I do plan to go back to China one day for a heritage trip and would incorporate searching for birth family into that. While my active search efforts are paused for now, this is a lifelong journey, so I can pick back up whenever I want to. It's nice to know that through my other initial search methods, the opportunity for a match is always possible, even without me doing anything.

However, I do worry that by waiting to pursue additional active search methods, I might be making the process more difficult the longer time goes on. I don't know if my orphanage has any adoption paperwork other than what I currently have and would hate for those documents to be destroyed. I also fear the possibility of birth family members dying, especially biological parents and grandparents. This thought crossed my mind when COVID-19 cases and deaths were high in China.

On the other hand, I don't know if I'm emotionally prepared for the can of worms that can come with more intensive searching and then a possible reunion. I know of adoptees who contacted their birth families, only to be rejected. Then there are others who have very complicated reunions and relationships. Though even considering the endless possibilities and the fact that I might never fully be ready, I still think searching and finding something unexpected is better than knowing nothing at all.

My advice to other adoptees who are considering searching for their birth family is to make sure you have a solid support system to lean on during this process. I also recommend personally reflecting on your motivations for searching and what you want to get out of it. Lastly, do your research on search options and leverage the existing resources

and lived experiences of others who are already familiar with this. I recommend joining the CCI Birth Parent Searching and Reunion Group on Facebook for any Chinese adoptees looking to start this journey.

Thanks for reading and best of luck to my fellow searching adoptees!

[www.shelleyrottenberg.ca](http://www.shelleyrottenberg.ca)

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## Allie Ruth

*Born in the Philippines, raised in the USA*

My name is Allie, I am 27 years old and I was adopted from the Philippines. Growing up I always wanted to find my biological mom. It wasn't until I was 16 and thank you to facebook, I was able to message the couple that ran the orphanage I came from and asked them if I could get information about my mother. They told me that they don't have any of our files and that I had to reach out to the Central Authority in the Philippines, ICAB (Intercountry Adoption Board) but I had to wait until I turned 18 years old.

The day that I turned 18, I told my parents I wanted to start searching for my mother, in the hopes that I could meet her. My parents supported me throughout the process and that definitely made the process for me easier, mentally and emotionally. I had sent out my email to ICAB about who I was, what orphanage I came from and my mother's name. I waited months and months until I heard back from ICAB. Around 6 months later, I received my first email back from ICAB with information that I already knew — my mother's name and where I was born. I emailed back asking if they knew where she was. After I sent that email, I waited for about 3 years until I heard back from ICAB.

It was that day in which my life changed and ICAB gave me more information than I could ever imagine. They weren't able to track down my biological mother but they were able to find my relatives. I remember breaking down in joyful tears because I was starting to find missing pieces of the puzzles in my life. I decided to take things in my own hands, instead of waiting for ICAB. I went to facebook and searched the names that I was given and found a few relatives. I messaged them stating who I was.

Patently I would wait for a reply from someone. There were some that were a dead end and eventually, I received a message from one of my relatives that stated they were my biological mother's uncle and from there, the word that I was still alive ran up and down my relative line. I started to receive friend requests and messages from more relatives. I started to feel whole again! The 4 years of emotional roller coaster ride, of high hopes and disappointment was all worth it. Unfortunately no-one knew where my biological mother was but if I'm being honest, I started this search for one person and

instead, I found about 10 relatives who can answer more of my questions than I ever imagined.

Right now, I am in the process of planning my visit back to the Philippines to meet everyone in person. If you are thinking about starting your process or you have already started your process, I would recommend to be open with your adoptive family. It makes the process easier knowing you have support. I also would keep in mind, it is a long process and try to not be discouraged. It took me about 5 years to find relatives and those years were hard when it came to waiting, but in the end I look back and think it was worth it in the end.



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# Chae Ryan

*Born in South Korea, raised in Australia*

I must preface this to say I am still searching for my biological family. I am aware there are different aspects to searching and I know that I haven't exhausted all of them yet. I'm getting there.

## Mental Health Support

I am fortunate that I have Private Health Care. When I started my birth family search and contact began with the Korean adoption agency, I had already learned from other adopted people from my adoption agency that this experience would be a traumatic one. I had stayed as an inpatient at a mental health clinic previously and have a really great relationship with the clinic. They understood that this experience would be a deeply traumatic and painful one. I checked myself in and this gave me the opportunity to just focus on having that full time support and having therapists and other patients to talk to.

I also started therapy with an adoption-specific counsellor at an adoption counselling centre. Their support helped me better understand the trauma and some of the challenges involved with the birth family search.

## Networking and connecting with other Adoptees

I had learned from other adoptees that my agency was responsible for some really troubling human rights violations in regard to our adoptions. I also learned that the agency in the present day may not help us find our family - even though they lead us to believe they are helping.

I started to read books and watch documentaries created or authored by other adoptees chronicling their experiences, to learn more.

## Creating a Support Network

Adoption had not been something I had talked about to people that I was close to in my life before. I learned that I couldn't take on this emotional journey alone and started to connect with people in my life around what I was dealing with. Not feeling alone and isolated in my experience became crucially important to me getting through some of the difficult emotions.

Some barriers that prevented me searching before now? I had believed my entire life in the falsified and deceptive documentation from my adoption agency that there was “no record” of my birth parents. I also believed the story that my adoptive parents had told me as a child, that there was no possible way of finding my parents.

I had not believed it would be possible to find my parents until I learned of the stories and reunions of other Korean adoptees. Even though starting the process was a simple internet search away, I'd never allowed myself to entertain the idea of even imagining the possibility of a reunion. After all, why imagine something that wasn't possible? It would just create further pain and heartache. I was ignorant and naive to the possibility that this false reality wasn't true.

I learned of the searching process by connecting with the Australian state department responsible for facilitating my adoption here in Australia.

I have not had contact with my adoptive parents through my process of searching. A thought has crossed my mind that I feel liberated not having to worry about tempering or filtering myself through the lens of not wanting to hurt my adoptive parents. I feel that the emotional journey of searching is challenging enough to process without the added layer of masking your authentic self in order to be considerate to your adoptive parents feelings and emotions also.

My search is still ongoing, but I'd estimate that inclusive of DNA testing, so far it has cost me about \$700 - \$1000. I am a firm believer that search costs should be covered for adoptees, especially in instances where there has been a history of human rights violations.

It's hard to know who to trust whilst searching, especially as I feel many adoptees struggle to trust. Understanding the interests and financial money trail is important to know - I believe organisations and actors should be more transparent with this. Unfortunately, adopted people are a vulnerable group and not all organisations or people will act in their best interests. There may be other stakeholders and ulterior motivations involved.

Connecting with Korean adoptees and those from my adoption agency helped me a lot to understand who to trust. Finding other adoptees who have been through this journey before has taught me a great deal about the process. For the most part, I believe

that they have the most genuine motivations - know exactly how difficult this process is, who to trust and the considerations/emotional complexities along the way.

I used both paper searches with the adoption agency and the State department that facilitated my adoption to help me with my search. My adoption agency in Korea reported back that they did not have enough information to find my father and they had attempted to contact my mother, but she had declined to respond.

My adoption agency in Korea then shared with me a new story regarding my birth parents which was completely different and contradictory to my original adoption story ("family social history") and claimed that they "assumed" this new story was likely the reason my birth mother did not want contact. I would later learn by sharing my documents and communications with other Korean adoptees, that they have also been given similar stories, and once they found their biological parents through DNA or other processes, they confirmed both their original documentation and their current communications with the agency to be falsified, full of lies. Learning of this was incredibly traumatic as I came to terms with the fact that those who had created my adoption were actively trying to prevent me from finding my family, rather than helping me.

I also used DNA searching, though I'm still in the process of utilising all of the possible DNA search methods available. This has been a bit of a learning curve in understanding the DNA testing and matching process. I have yet to find any close matches.

In summary, I am still searching. It's difficult knowing that my adoption agency likely has my real story and paperwork that conclusively links me to my biological parents. I am hoping in the future, the entities investigating the falsification of my identity will release this information to me.

I'm still learning of available resources such as adoptee friendly places to stay and translation services. I recommend reaching out to a trusted adoptee led community and find an adoption counsellor or informed therapist.

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## Raya Snow

*Born in Russia, raised in Canada*

I was born in the city of Ivanovo Oblast, Russia 1989. It is located North East of Moscow with a population of 361,641. After I was born, my mother and father moved to the Caucasus of Russia, Derbent. After I turned 3, my parents got divorced and my mother and I moved to Stavropol, North of the Caucasus.

Eventually, my mother met another man and we started living together in a two bedroom apartment. He was a very abusive and narcissistic man who would abuse both my mother and myself. I believe my mother one day left him, leaving me in his care. Not being his blood relative, he shortly dropped me off to my mother's great-aunt's place. This is where my journey really unfolded.

My great-great aunt ( Elvira), was a religious older woman whose life revolved around the church and God. We lived somewhat happily together, but I would always wonder about my mother and her whereabouts. Sometimes my mother would come to the house to see me, but those were always incredibly short visits. Due to her never being around, the neighbours started to question my health and education. Elvira then thought to start looking for a forever home for myself.

I remember, she would advise me to be on my best behaviour, to listen well, in order for a family to take me or to buy me off of her. Being only about 5 years of age, I was very excited to be able to visit other families with children, play with them, and get to know them. Deep down in my heart, I knew that I wouldn't be able to stay with them because some were far worse off than I was, living with my aunt.

One day, there was a lady that came to the door, asking to speak to Elvira about a family from Canada wanting to adopt a little Russian girl. Elvira was so pleased about this news that she allowed the woman to take pictures of herself which she would then send to the family in Canada. The woman let us know there would be a man who would come in the following weeks to advise if the Canadian family was interested in the child, me. In the meantime, I was still going from home to home, to see if anyone showed any interest in purchasing me.

A month or two later, there was another knock on our gate and as the lady mentioned, there was a man (George) who came to see Elvira and I. George brought us fruits and sweets which I would eat while the two were speaking intently. He let Elvira know that the Canadian family took an interest in me and was willing to pay a big sum in order to adopt me. She let him know the process would not be an easy one as all my documentation was lost in a car accident where both of my parents died tragically.

According to her statement, I survived miraculously by the will of God. She then showed George the death certificate of my parents, leaving me, a little orphan in her will. George suggested we start the process by recreating new documents, stating my mother's name and him as the biological father in my new birth certificate.

Me, being this little girl, understanding that my mother will never return back to me, as she had left and I hadn't seen her maybe for months, I felt a new adventure was about to unfold. George started coming by the house more often, gaining my trust and I his. We became great friends and I enjoyed having a "father figure" in my life. On the weekends, I would go over to his house and meet his wife and children, who took me in with open arms.

A turning point was about to happen when Elvira spoke to our neighbours and let them know she was going to take the money and myself up West, to the Ural Mountains where the rest of our family resided. The neighbours were saddened by this news as I was a very malnourished little girl who needed attentive medical care, so they called George straight away and let him know the alarming news. George of course, called the potential family in Canada and let them know that they needed to save me and hide me while the rest of the documentation was being prepared. The Canadian family agreed and I was brought to a small city near Moscow, where the biological relatives of their family lived. There, I met my wonderful adoptive mom, with whom I gained an instantaneous attachment because of desperately wanting to feel loved and cared for.

I believe I lived with the family in Moscow for about 6 months. While my documents were getting done, I started attending pre-school, spent time with relatives on the weekends, went to church on Sundays and welcomed a new package from my Canadian family every few weeks or so.

It was sometime in June when George came back into my life again. This time, we were going to begin our travels to Canada. The process was a very tricky one, I had to

learn to call him “dad” and he would call me “daughter”. George let me know that we had to fake a bond, where authorities would not be able to question our relationship to one another. Our lives were at stake if any one of us did something questionable, I could be sent to an orphanage and he to prison.

We first began our trip to Moscow, where we stayed at George's blind father's place for a few days before heading out on a Cargo ship to Turkey. I remember the ship well and I grew fond of the people in it. Once we reached Turkey, we took a flight to France which I don't have any memories of, and from there we flew to Canada.

Once we got off the flight, I could see in the hallway above me, there were many people waiting to greet their loved ones. My adoptive parents were one of those people, who were waiting with balloons and a cam-recorder for that very first hug. George and my adoptive mom ended up getting married and this “happy” ending lasted for a couple more years until George and my adoptive mom separated (finalised the divorce) and then she claimed full custody of me.

Twenty-five years went by, I started on my search for my biological parents which I have found with great success. I had help through a friend of my adoptive mom who was able to help me find my biological mother on a Russian app. I have found my biological mother, who is still well and alive with a beautiful, big family who has been supporting her throughout the loss of her child, me. I have also reconnected with my biological father, whom I found through a Russian tv show and he had been at war in 1994 - 1996 between the Chechens and the Russians. After the war ended, he began his search for me, with no leading answers on my whereabouts or my biological mother from Elvira.

This is a true story. It is a story of grief, loss, abandonment and also happiness. I would like to bring awareness that abduction happens, that childhood trafficking exists and it needs to be spoken about. Adoptees are lacking support in those areas as we are terrified to speak about our truths and what the truth might do to those surrounding us.

This is a new era, a space to bring light to our journeys, to the eyes of our governments, our adopters, adoption organisations and our peers. Let's start creating legal changes through advocacy and the support of our fellow adoptees! Together, let's share our truths!

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## Jillian Suh-Kurovski Legris

*Born in Sth Korea, raised in the USA*

This is the story of a 24-year-old Korean Holt adoptee from the Midwest United States who met their family at the age of 20. I don't feel it would be appropriate of me to give, say, a list of advice, as I understand everybody's search process is different. So, I hope that in sharing my story, others may find themselves in it, get a glimpse into what the process may hold, or at least know that somebody out there knows how they feel, as the search process can feel isolating and lonely with seemingly nobody to understand it.

My reunion story has been called "exciting," "perfect," "a Hallmark movie," but I want people to know that no reunion story is perfect, and my reunion has been filled with joy, anger, sadness, despair, laughter, and love. I also want to acknowledge that knowing my birth family, being in contact with them, and having a largely positive relationship with them is a privilege many other adoptees do not and will not have.

Growing up, I was not interested in my birth family, or interested in searching for them. I did not feel I was missing anything in my life by not knowing who they were. A few times for my adoption day, my adoptive parents would ask me if I wanted information on my adoption—specifically, if I wanted to know more about my parents. Each time they asked, I declined. I did not feel ready for that information, especially as a child.

As I describe to most of my friends, my birth parents seemed like a fairy tale. They lived far, far away and were almost mythical. It wasn't until I was 20 that I thought about starting a birth search. I owe that to my cousin, an adoptee who found our family, her birth family. Bringing her into our family sparked my curiosity. I thought carefully about whether I was ready to receive life altering information about my adoption and potentially contact my birth family. I am a deeply emotional person, and I told myself I had to start my search at the right time, or it may have consequences on my mental health and my undergraduate career. One of the biggest lessons I learned in my search is that no time is the perfect time.

I imagine some people romanticise how the decision to dive into one's adoptive history is made and the beautiful moment they realise they desire to connect with the people who so preciously brought them into the world, but mine started at an Applebee's.



I remember telling my adoptive mother how my cousin had inspired me, and my intentions to find my family were purely out of curiosity. I could feel my heartbeat steadily increase as I told her I had researched how the process might work through Holt, and that it would begin with getting access to my case file. From there, Holt would go through my case file and see if I would be able to contact my foster family and/or my birth family with the information they had.

My mother's face lit up from across the table. I have heard some adoptive parents are wary of their children doing birth searches, but every word out of her mouth and every bit of her body language wrapped me warmly in her support. I would even go as far to say she was excited, more excited than I. To my surprise, my mother, one of the most organised women on the planet, said she had the information I had been seeking. She had my case file neatly printed out in a binder, a keepsake from her own journey into my adoption, and said that she would bring it the next time she saw me.

I do not remember receiving the binder from her, but I remember the moment I read it. I was alone in my one-bedroom apartment sitting quietly on the far right of my cheap brown two-seater couch. Was I ready for the information I had so vehemently denied as a child? The room felt terrifyingly silent as I opened the binder that held my own personal secrets I had never known. The plastic sheet protectors softly crackled between my fingers and I could feel my heart beating in my ears. At the front of the binder was a photo of my adoptive parents standing in front of their quaint home in the Midwest countryside, giving their best smiles in hopes of being chosen as parents to the child they could not conceive. Their supportive gazes faced me as I turned the page.

The first few pages were written in Korean as well as legal paperwork in English. I was initially underwhelmed until I came across a page titled "Confidential Background Information." My eyes quickly traced the page as I felt my heart beating faster.

(Some of the following information has been changed for privacy)



1. Child's Name: Suh, Jung Hwa  
 Date and Time of Birth: 07/26/98(10:35) Correct: \_\_\_ \* \_\_\_ Presumed: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name given by: Family: \_\_\_\_\_ Social Worker: \_\_\_ \* \_\_\_ Police: \_\_\_\_\_ Child's Memory: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Meaning of Given Name: Jung (Honest) Hwa (Girl's name)

2. Relinquished by: Birth Mother

Abandoned at:

3. Parents	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>
a) Age/Edu	35/High Sch. Grad	41/High Sch. Grad
b) Job/	None	Commerce
c) Marital status/Blood Type	Divorced/B	Deceased/?
d) Physical appearance (Height, physique, face shape & color...)	163cm tall, straight hair Double eyelids, average physique	165cm tall, straight hair Average physique
e) Personality, talent...	Bright, well-rounded	Well-rounded
f) Remarks		

\*Siblings: One sister at age 20

4. Child's Birth History  
 Full term \_\_\_ \* \_\_\_ Premature \_\_\_\_\_ Normal \_\_\_\_\_ Breech \_\_\_\_\_ C-section \_\_\_\_\_  
 Or vacuum \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_ How long before baby cried: Immediately.  
 Birthplace: A hospital in Taegu City Birth Weight: 2.74kg  
 Medicine used during pregnancy: None.  
 Family's mental or physical illness history: No information

5. Other information on parents and reason for relinquishment:

I could feel my heart reaching out of my chest, taking in every word that followed. The document gave a paragraph telling the story of my mother and how she came to the decision to put me up for adoption— A story I felt an immense amount of sympathy and love for. In the interest of my mother's privacy, I choose not to give the full details of what was written.

I thought to myself, "I have my father's eyes." I raced to the bathroom and stared in the mirror, attempting to envision the attributes listed as my parents standing beside me. Did I look more like my mother? Or my father? Do I get my talents and success from my mother? The paperwork called her "bright," and yet she only had a high school diploma. I wish I had gotten her double eyelids. One sister. I have a sister! I have a sister? Does she know about me? Does she look like me? How do I find her? Father. Father, I have your eyes! I hope you think I am beautiful in your image. Father? Deceased. Deceased. How do I grieve you? What was your religion? Do I say a prayer? Mother. Mother, I am so sorry you had to go through this. You were so loving and so kind. I am so sorry, mother. Your pain is now mine.

I sat back on my couch, paging through the rest of the binder. I found my family registry, akin to a birth certificate.

**Family Chief: Suh, Jung Hwa**

**Relation to Previous Family Chief: no record**

**Father: no record**

**Mother: no record**

**Sex: female**

**Date of Birth: 07/26/98**

**Family Origin: Hanyang**

In that moment it settled in my heart that I was deeply disconnected from my birth culture and my birth family. In that moment, I felt alone.

The rest of the papers seemed to detail my growth and development as a baby and preparation for adoption.

#### SPEECH

Babbles well. Turns head when called by her name. Laughs aloud when pleasant. Recognizes familiar voice. Watches T.V.

#### ABILITIES

Pushes a baby walker. Reaches her hands to catch a toy and puts it into mouth. Takes toys from others. Creeps well. Tears off paper. Chest up well.

#### PERSONALITY

Is a cute, lovable baby. Cries if left alone. Is shy with Strangers. Cries when her diaper is wet, or she feels hungry. Likes to take a bath. Loves to be outdoors, carried on one's back.

#### EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Jung Hwa's weight and height are somewhat below average compared to other children of her age. But she has good constitution. At present, she is growing up well with the mother's sincere care. Her motor coordination, feeding and digestion are in good condition. So, she is expected to grow up healthily in the future. We hope Jung Hwa will find good adoptive parents as soon as possible and grow up healthily and properly with her new family's love.

I closed the binder and hugged my knees to my chest, silently grieving the family I never knew. For the next few days, I found myself disassociated with the world around me. I stopped going to school and I stopped going to work. Maybe I hadn't been ready to know.

Eventually, one of my bosses noticed I had been missing and sent me an email checking in on me. All I could say to them was that I had been struggling emotionally. I would return soon, and I was sorry for missing work. At that point I had to acknowledge that life carries on, even in the pits of grief. I had a university degree to finish and jobs to sustain my living. I was helping to write a play for my school (ironically, about immigration and adoption as immigration). I had to perform music at a local church. Most importantly, I was preparing to do research abroad in the Mariana islands.

As life carried on, I maintained contact with Holt to pursue a birth family search. They told me they would update me if it would be possible to contact my mother, but in the meantime, there was paperwork to be done.

About a month or so later, around spring of 2019, I was talking with our lab's manager about the route to travel to the Marianas. She gave me and the PhD student I had been working with, two options for our summer research travels: we could travel through Hawaii to get to Guam, or we could travel through Korea. I felt my breath leave my body as my words awkwardly tumbled out.

"Could we go through Korea? I'd love to see my birth country, even if it's just stopping in an airport."

"Let me see what I can do!" she said.

A few days later, as I was walking from my apartment to the bus stop across the street during a gentle rain, I received a call. It was our lab manager.

"Hi Jillian! I booked your and Jerilyn's flights. I have you guys traveling through Korea, and I added a 3 day layover so that you can explore Korea on your way back!"

I mustered out a "Thank you!" and hung up. I dropped to my knees, holding my umbrella in one hand and wiping tears with the other. I would be traveling to my birth country for the first time since my adoption.

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Holt indicated to me that a birth search would be possible but cautioned me to be careful in consideration that it would be an emotional process. I decided to pursue a birth search because I thought it was the best time to do so, even if it didn't feel like it. Holt then told me I needed to prepare several documents for my search:

- Assisted Search Application – must be notarised
- Affidavit for Identification – must be notarised
- Petition for Disclosure
- An introductory letter to your birth parent
- At least one current photo of yourself

On 15 May, I left for the Marianas. We boarded our plane in Iowa and would stop in Chicago, Istanbul, Korea, and finally, Guam. As our plane from Istanbul approached Korea, a Korean stewardess walked to my seat and began to speak in Korean. She handed me a form written in Korean to fill out. Embarrassed, I asked Jerilyn to show me her form that was written in English so I knew what mine said. As our plane touched down, I could feel the tears welling in my eyes. My mother was just beyond the plane somewhere. Somewhere.

As I walked through the airport, I tried my hardest to keep my composure. I watched Korean families greet their loved ones as they filed in from the planes. Mothers hugging their daughters, joyous that they had returned home safely. Children shouting, “Omma!” “Mother!” Never had I felt such anguish and envy. In that moment, I silently prayed to be reunited with my birth mother in the same way. Our flights continued and we safely arrived in the Marianas, but I couldn’t stop thinking about my mother.

Research continued on the islands and so did my birth search. Sometime in June we ended up on the island of Rota. I needed to find time to write the letter to my birth mother, so on a particularly nice night accompanied by a warm breeze, I sat on our field house’s balcony to begin my daunting task. I knew there was a possibility my mother may read my letter and never respond, as she may be ashamed of me, or she may be put in danger due to my contact. So, I asked myself, “How do I put 20 years of my life into one letter?” I wrote my letter as if it was the only time I would ever be able to speak to my mother. I wanted her to be proud of me and know I was accomplished and successful. I wanted to seem like the perfect daughter.

*“My dear mother,*

*As I have grown older, questions have surrounded my mind about my past. I have always been curious as to who my parents were- and are. Recently, I have decided to investigate my history and found some of the answers I have been hoping for. I am writing to you as your daughter - and I am looking for solace in knowing you are alive and well. I*

*do not want to bother you or put you in any danger, so please do not feel obligated to respond to me. Your safety and health are what matter most to me. It is very difficult to convey all 20 years of my life in one letter- so, I hope to explain the best I can...*

*This year, I will be turning 21 years old. I completed high school in 2016 and have been in university for 3 years. This fall of 2019, I will be entering my final year of college. I will be graduating with a degree in ecology, a certificate in leadership studies, and a minor in entomology. I hope to continue my studies until I earn a PhD. I want to become a professor and teach at a university someday. I hope to make you proud.*

*Currently, I am in the Mariana islands (Guam, Saipan, Rota, etc.) doing research for my university. The lab I work for aims to understand the ecology of bird loss on Guam. I am training as an insect and spider specialist and the professor I work for wants me to write a field guide for the spiders of the Marianas.*

*To get to the Marianas, I landed in Korea for the first time since I was born. My heart was overcome with emotion. I thought of you fondly every second I was there. I will be returning to Korea soon for a few days, and I hope to visit [Redacted] city. I will be thinking of you then as well.*

*I want you to know I had a wonderful childhood. I am a part of a family of 5- my adoptive mother and father, my brother (who is adopted from Korea as well), and a sister (the biological child of my adoptive parents). I am the oldest child of three. We grew up in the Midwest of the United States where I was surrounded by fields of corn, birds, deer, coyotes, and many more. We also had many dogs and cats as pets. I attribute my love for nature to growing up in a rural area.*

*When I was around 12 years old, we moved to a larger city to be closer to my high school. I went to a predominately white school, and it felt very empty to be one of few Asian students there. I have always wished to be closer to my culture and to learn my native tongue. I have been trying very hard to learn it as of recent.*

*In high school, I did many activities- I played volleyball, softball, and soccer. I also starred in many plays and musicals. Aside from that, I was selected for prestigious leadership conferences both regional and international. My senior year, I was the lead of the musical. I also sang in choir and did competitive acting- for which I won many awards. I also received a national award for my writing and received the award at Carnegie Hall in New York City. I always had a full schedule and was featured in many of the school's*

*yearbook photos.*

*Though I did well in high school and graduated near the top of my class, I feel I have done best in college. After I graduated high school, I received a full-tuition scholarship at my university for my academic excellence. I accepted the scholarship and began my freshman year in August of 2016.*

*In my first year of college, I had many great experiences. One of the greatest experiences was being a part of a women's choir. We were selected to sing at a very large choir conference, where hundreds of people came to see us sing. In that same year, I was elected president of my residence hall floor as well as starting a job at the university's insect zoo. This is where I found my love for insects and spiders. At my job, I took care of over one hundred different species of insects and arachnids. I traveled with them across the state to teach children and adults about the importance of bugs and what they do. I have been featured in newspapers and television because of the work I did.*

*My second year of college, I continued to excel. I was receiving top marks in my courses and did had many more new experiences. I was elected as president of the environmental education club where I taught youth about nature. The women's choir I sang in was asked to perform in New York City at Carnegie Hall- a very prestigious concert hall in the United States. I also traveled to the island of Madagascar in Africa for an ecology course.*

*I have recently completed my third year of university, and it has been one of the busiest and most eventful of my career. For two semesters in a row I took 20 credit hours of courses. Outside of class, I had a lot of things to do. It was my final year as the president of the environmental education club where I gave programs at local libraries and schools about nature. By the end of the year, I was elected vice president of the Asian Student Union as well as joined the Asian-interest sorority on campus called Delta Phi Lambda. Being a part of the Asian community on my university campus has meant a lot to me. I have made it my goal to give back to the Asian community as much as possible.*

*One of the best parts of my semester was being in a play called "Iowa Odyssey." The play centered around the experience of Iowa as "home." It was created by interviewing those who lived in Iowa as well as immigrated there. I was asked to write a piece for the play about adoption. I also learned to speak some Korean for the play. I had many adoptees after the play tell me that they really enjoyed it and related to what I had written. To write my piece for the play, I had to talk about my adoption publicly for the first time. I cried many*



*times during interviews. I cried tears of sorrow as well as tears of joy. To finally know about you and my father brings me so many emotions.*

*This year, I was invited to sing at an “international night” at my local church. I sang “Arirang” in a hanbok to a crowd. I thought of you and my father with every note I sang. I studied the song for hours- learning to sing it as well as the history of the song. To be able to sing “Arirang” made me so proud of my native country. It made me determined to reach out to you and to visit my homeland. When I stop by in Korea this August, I hope to be in Taegu- at least for a few hours.*

*I tried my best to sum up the highlights of these last almost 21 years. I love you, mother, and I hope you can be proud of my accomplishments and the woman I have become. Though, you are not obligated to return any of my sentiments. I do not want to ask too much of you. If possible, I would like to hear back from you- in a letter or even to see you if I visit Korea again. At the very least, I would like to know where my father is buried so I can pay my respects to him. If you are unable to, I do not mind. Again, I do not want to ask too much of you. I am honored to be your daughter, and I love you. I know you have so much bravery and courage from the little I know of you. You are somebody I admire most, and I will continue to love and admire you no matter how you may respond to this letter. I wish you the best, and I hope you are well.*

*Love,*

*Your daughter”*

A colleague of mine walked up to me as I was writing my letter. I turned to face him with tears streaming down my face. I couldn't speak. I could see the shock and discomfort on his face. I think he knew there were no words to comfort somebody in such a situation. Instead, he gently asked if I wanted to be left alone. I quietly shook my head yes.

Looking back on my letter, I can now laugh at how hard I tried to sound like the “perfect” daughter. I told my mother she had no obligation to respond, but at the time, I secretly had hoped my achievements would sway her into meeting me or at least long to see me. Of course, none of those accomplishments matter in the face of a mother's love.

I returned to Guam shortly after and had to get my documents notarised for my letter to reach my mother. **If I have any advice at all for adoptees doing birth searches that require notarisation, BRING ENOUGH CASH.** When I arrived at the notary, I had to pay to print a form from the notary and have the documents signed. As it turned out,

they didn't take card. I barely had enough cash to print the documents and pay the notary. As I handed over the documents to the notary, they told me I had filled out the document incorrectly. They told me I needed to pay once more to reprint the documents. So, I rummaged through my backpack for the little change I could find. There wasn't enough. Luckily, Jerilyn, the PhD student I worked for, was there to give me the change I needed. I printed and filled out the forms a second time, only to be told I filled them out incorrectly again. I began to sob in front of the notary. I felt devastated over something, in hindsight, so little. At the time, this felt like the only thing preventing my letter from reaching my birth mother. I begged and pleaded with the notary to use white out or to help me have it printed, but they refused. Jerilyn graciously paid for my third attempt, and finally, my documents were sent off to Holt.

I was told many times by Holt that birth searches can take a very long time. I expected to not hear back until I returned to the mainland United States in August.

The morning of 25 July, 2019 started like any other. I groggily woke up at 7am to get ready for fieldwork. I got my field gear on, packed my bag, and went to the bathroom. I sat down on the toilet to read the news like I did every morning. When I opened my phone, I saw a notification for an email with the subject line "From Holt International – IMPORTANT":

"Dear Jillian,

I have good news – Holt Korea has been in contact with your birth mother. We received the following email from Holt Korea:

*Gladly, the birth mother called me today after receiving the letter. She calmly admitted that she gave a birth to Jillian, and her statement was matched with Holt record for relinquishment. Her full name is [Redacted]. She got married the current husband over 10 years ago. She has never given a birth further after Jillian, and has step-children who all live out after marriage. As CBI says, she has a daughter before Jillian who isn't aware of her past. The birth mother is living with her husband now. Because her husband doesn't know about Jillian, she prefers to be contacted by email. So I passed Jillian's letter to her. She will be responding after having enough time to think about it.*

*Also, you mentioned about Jillian's visit to Korea in the beginning of next month. Does she want me to tell the birth mother regarding this? Or she prefers to wait for response?*



*Please advise. Thank you.*

(the following day)

*Jilian's birth mother sent a letter along with her pictures this afternoon.  
As Jilian is about to leave for Korea soon, I translated it right away.  
Please share them with her. Thank you!!*

Locating birth family can be a very emotional process, and you do have several options open to you at this time. Attached is a list of your options and things to consider regarding contact with your birth family. Having a good support system, through family, friends, and Holt, is very important. We want to do everything we can to ensure that your new relationship with your birth family proceeds smoothly over the weeks and months ahead.

Please let me know if you have any questions, now or at any time in the future. I'm glad to help any way I can.

Sincerely,  
Debby Hanson"

I opened the attached letter from my mother.

*"Dear Jung Hwa,*

*I'm shameful and feel sorry to call your name. When I saw your letter and picture, it made me recall my past about 20 years ago which I didn't want to think about but always stayed in my mind. I can't explain how I'm grateful for you to be grown up this great and beautiful.*

*Your birth father was born in [redacted for privacy]. My hometown is [redacted for privacy]. I met him in 1997, then started living together without register for marriage. One day he passed away from a car accident, I couldn't bear all the hardships including financial problem. After few months, I recognised my pregnancy. I wanted to give up everything but not you. I went to a catholic single mother's home asking help. When I decided for adoption, they helped to choose a hospital for delivery. Then you were sent to Holt.*

*I was back to my parents' house since I was suffering from toxemia. And years flowed on. I was informed that your birth father was cremated and his ashes were scattered at sea in his hometown. I was with his cremation and his funeral. But after that, I haven't been in touch with his family as his parents died early and there are only younger siblings. You resemble the birth father.*

*How's your trip schedule to Korea? As I'm working, I need to schedule in advance in order to meet you. I'm living with my husband in a town which takes 2 hours from Seoul. It's been 14 years with him. Our children are living out. It was not easy at all to tell my husband regarding your contact, but I did. Thankfully it went well.*

*I'm sorry for my belated response. You must have had hard feeling toward me. I'm wondering if your adoptive parents know about this search. I believe parenting love is bigger than giving a birth. So I'm worried if they are okay with this process. I need to say good-bye for my first letter here.*

*I'm sorry and miss you.  
Love you my daughter!!*

At the end of the letter were photos of my mother. I had never seen somebody who looked like me before. We had the same eyes, nose, face shape— Even her arms and hands resembled mine. I stared at her photos in disbelief.

I heard the front door open. It was Jerilyn. I jumped up from the toilet, struggling to pull up my pants, and ran into the living room.

“JERILYN! MY MOM WROTE ME BACK AND SHE WANTS TO MEET ME!” We jumped up and down, hugging and squealing with joy. The moment lasted only a few minutes, as we had work to do.

The next day Holt sent me another email.

“Dear Jillian,

I heard back from Holt Korea already, and they've spoken with your birth mom! Here is the email I received from the case worker Ms. Ryu Min-hyun.

*Thank you for the letter! I passed it to the birth mother. She is very happy and able to see Jillian on the day of arrival.*

*She will travel to Seoul after finishing her work. So I arranged the first reunion at my office @4:30pm, August 2nd(Fri). They will have a meeting about an hour at Holt. Please let me know if it works for her. And it'd be great if you convey some information of her trip, such as flight schedules and hotel name. Then I will find a volunteer translator for their dinner together.*

*The birth mother hasn't decided any plan for the weekend at this moment. So I will keep you updated.*

Attached is an updated map to the Holt offices (there are 2 buildings), Ms. Ryu's contact information, and photos to help you find the offices. Since your trip is coming so quickly, I think it would be best for you to start emailing Ms. Ryu directly to save time and avoid any delays if I'm not available. When you email her, make sure you include your Korean name and case number in the subject line and address it to Ms. Ryu Min-hyun. They all use the same email address but are very, very good at making sure the correct person receives the email.

Please let me know if you have any questions before, during, or after your trip. And have an awesome visit to Korea!

Sincerely,  
Debby Hanson

Attached to the email were packets that gave advice on Korean manners and etiquette, Korean survival phrases, and directions to finding the Holt offices. *I had one week to prepare for the meeting with my mother.* The etiquette packet instructed me to bring a gift to my parents and gifts for any unexpected guests or translators. It also mentioned that the first meeting should be brief, but a translator would be provided.

I struggled to think of gifts to bring my birth mother. I felt as if I should give her the world. She deserved nothing less, but I was living on a student budget. Luckily, Guam has a night market on the weekends with many local vendors and hand-crafted items. I remember sitting in a jewelry shop for what seemed like hours. I carefully observed each piece of jewellery and what each piece could symbolise as a gift to my mother. I took so long that an elderly woman behind the counter asked if she could help me.

At first, I was shy to tell her why I was there. I didn't think anybody could understand how important this was to me and how big of a decision it felt like. Eventually, after a line of questioning, she got an answer out of me. I told her I would be

meeting my birth mother for the first time, and I wanted to find her the perfect gift. She excitedly and warmly relayed to me that she was a mother and a grandmother herself. Knowing how much she loved her children and grandchildren; she knew how important it was to me to find the right gift. She was excited to help me, and she talked with me through each piece of jewellery I considered. I settled on a sterling silver necklace with a charm in the shape of a tree, just barely in my price range.

After I purchased the necklace, I wandered around the night market looking for other trinkets to bring to my birth family and for translators. I heard laughter coming from a nearby juice stand and a young man attempting to catch people's attention. Charming and handsome, he called me over and began to talk to me in Korean. I blushed and admitted I am Korean, *but* my Korean was very poor. I shyly mentioned that I would like to learn Korean for my parents, as I would be meeting them soon. In the most suave manner, he told me he would teach me some Korean if I agreed to go out on a date with him. I happily obliged.

When he picked me up for our date, he greeted me in Korean and immediately began to teach me basic phrases. The most important one being, "I missed you." We had a wonderful time together, and I was extremely grateful for his kindness and willingness to teach me the little Korean I could remember. At the end of our date, he showed me an app called Papago. He told me it would be my best bet at translating between my parents and me. At the end of our time together, he kissed me goodbye and wished me luck on my journey. I am forever grateful for having met him.

In the days leading up to my meeting with my birth family, I was nervous to my core. I wanted everything to be perfect. I dedicated an entire day to finding an outfit to meet my family in. I tried on countless dresses and practiced my bowing etiquette in the mirror. I spent another day hunting for more gifts at the night market, and on the last day before I was to leave, I packed up my belongings while practicing the little Korean I knew. "I missed you."

As Jerilyn and I landed in Korea in the early morning and set up our air BnB, I made a terrible discovery. I left all my bras in Guam. I had forgotten to take my last load of laundry out of the drier before leaving. I panicked, and Jerilyn offered to look with me around Seoul for bras. We searched high and low to no avail. We even found a Victoria's Secret, but the woman working there said, "No bra in Korea."

*NO BRAS IN KOREA?* Just my luck. I texted a Korean friend of mine frantically, “ARE THERE REALLY NO BRAS IN KOREA?!”

My anxiety over meeting my parents skyrocketed, and I tried to console myself by thinking of the loose clothing I brought with me.

I was to meet my birth parents at 4:30pm at the Holt offices that day. After coming to terms with failing to find a single bra, it was time to head to Holt. As Jerilyn walked me down to the train station, I felt the butterflies in my stomach flutter. She told me the train station was as far as she could go, and she left once I had printed my ticket.

As I boarded the crowded train, the world seemed so incredibly large, and I was so incredibly small. I was surrounded by people— Korean people. I looked like a deer in headlights as I stared with wide eyes at everyone around me. I naïvely thought that if I visited Korea, I may feel a sense of belonging, maybe even a sense of home. I felt more foreign than ever.

A robotic voice called overhead, “Hap-jeong station.” I anxiously stepped off the train and pulled up the map sent by Holt on my phone. Frankly, I am not the best with directions unless it’s Google Maps. I felt tears well in my eyes as I began to realize that I was lost in the middle of Seoul. I saw a man standing outside a run-down looking shop and showed him my map. “Yeogi?” I pointed to the Holt offices. The man scowled at me and waved at me to leave.

I wandered around, following the directions as best I could. Fortunately, I stumbled upon my destination by a miracle. I looked up at the tall building in front of me. A blue sign reading “Holt” hung over the door. I imagined what my mother must have felt like when she contacted Holt. Had she been here before? Did she also stare at the sign? How many other mothers have walked through these doors with the world weighing on their shoulders? How many adoptees have entered, chasing their mother’s ghosts? A life altering building, and here I was, walking through its doors.

The entrance was quiet, almost eerie. There was a shelf with a sign politely asking me to remove my shoes and replace them with a set of slippers. I entered an elevator in which an emotionless doorman stood. Unable to speak Korean, I signaled the floor number with my fingers. The elevator proceeded, yet the air felt still, as if it was stuck in time; perhaps, it was reversing time.

When the elevator doors opened, I entered a front office and indicated I was there for a reunion. The worker at the desk happily greeted me. “Your parents called and—” I held my breath. Maybe they did not want to see me after all. “—they told us they were going to be late.” Thank goodness.

The worker kindly escorted me to a small room. The room was just large enough to fit 3 couches (one per wall) and a table in the center. On the table rested large books with Korean children on the cover. Though the book was in Korean, context told me that it was a book about adoption. I whispered to myself, “bogo sip-eoss-eo.”

“I missed you.”

I could feel my blue dress hugging at my waist slightly. I hope my parents think I’m beautiful. Will they think I’m too tan? I spent an entire summer working outdoors. Maybe I’m not skinny enough. I’m not skinny by normal standards. I sucked in my stomach and felt it with my hand.

I sat in the room for about an hour or so. It felt like years. The thought tugged at me again. Maybe they weren’t coming. In that moment I had recalled reading an article about adoptee reunion where one woman’s mother refused to look at her.

Eventually, I heard a quick knock on the door followed by the sound of feet shuffling. With my heart beating out of my chest, I gained the courage to look up.

There was my mother, in all her beauty, *our beauty*, standing before me.

We stared at each other in disbelief, immediately followed by smiles as wide as our faces. Suddenly, all my practice bowing, all the Korean I had been working on; everything left me. She hugged me, slightly pulling away to look at my face. She touched her hand to my cheek with a smile, as if to ask, “*are you real?*” There were no tears, only smiles.

She grabbed my hand and sat on the couch next to me. She sat so close to me, her warmth enveloping the left side of my body. I could feel my cheeks red and warm with excitement and joy. I hope she loves me.

On the single-seater couch against the wall to my left sat my stepfather. His jaunty shape was overshadowed by his stoic face. Across from us sat a translator from Holt. To be honest, I don’t remember how much of the conversation started. I remember presenting my parents with their gifts and being asked what kind of Korean food I like to eat. I told

them my favorite is bulgogi. My father's straight face cracked a smile, and in broken English he laughed, "like your mother. Your mother like sweet food." I looked at my mom, holding my hand, laughing. At the end of our meeting time, the translator told me that we would be headed to dinner together, and a volunteer translator would be joining us.

Everything felt like a blur. I don't even remember how we got to the restaurant. I remember my mother holding my hand as we walked up to the restaurant. She remarked that I was short— even shorter than her 5'2" stature, and that I should eat more. I told her (through the translator), "I want to grow taller, not wider." She laughed like it were a normal conversation between a mother and daughter out on the town together.

If I have learned anything from being immersed in Asian culture throughout my undergraduate career, it's that Asian people often show their love through food. My mother kept asking me what I wanted, but I couldn't read the menu. So, she ordered *everything*. I still have the image in my mind of my mother cutting meat for me and dipping my noodles for me. She was feeding me like I was a child, *her* child.

After dinner, we went to a small café. The walls were decorated in Kpop idol paraphernalia. We sat in a corner with our coffees. The space seemed to fall silent as my parents quietly spoke to the translator. The translator looked at me solemnly. The child inside me panicked. Did they not want me anymore? Was I not good enough? The translator slowly said, "Your parents want you to know that they cannot tell the rest of their family about you. They will in time, but they cannot yet." I looked relieved. I didn't care if anybody knew about me or not. I was just happy to be with my mother.

We had casual conversation after until the translator notified me that she would have to be leaving. She said it would be the responsibility of my parents and I to translate for each other from now on. I appreciated her help, but I was a happy about her departure. For one, I noticed my parents would say a lot in Korean, but the translator would boil it down to one or two sentences. I was upset I was not getting the full story. Second, I was happy to be able to be by myself with my parents.

I had agreed to stay with my mother for the remainder of the trip, so I got into my parents' car to leave Seoul for their apartment. I stared out the window as we left the city, admiring the country I had come from. My stepfather would occasionally point out landmarks in the best English he could, giving me a brief history of their significance. My mother would translate with me back and forth on Papago, little by little, mostly telling



me I should rest after a long trip and take a nap in the car, as the drive would be about two hours.

At some point during the car ride, my mother looked back at me and handed me a small and oddly packaged drink. With it, she handed me two pills. It suddenly dawned on me that I had agreed to get into a car with two, essentially strangers, to drive away from where I had landed and into an unknown city where nobody would know my whereabouts and I had no cellphone signal. The conspiracy theorist in me emerged. Maybe it had all been a façade so my parents could dispose of me and none of the family could ever know.

The shock on my face must have given away my thoughts, as my father said in a heavy Korean accent,

“Por your lipor.”

I looked at him confused.

“Por your LIPOR.”

“Mweo? *What?*”

My mother grew tired of the confusion and turned the bottle around. On it was an image of a liver.

“Por your LIPOR.”

“OH H H H H H H H H. FOR YOUR LIVER. I SEE.”

It turned out they were just health nuts.

We arrived shortly at a large gas station with a food court. My parents ordered a roll of kimbap for us all to share. I was still full from dinner, but I managed to get down a few bites, just so I could please them. Their love symbolized by my stomach, overindulged by food.

We got to their apartment late in the night, sometime near midnight. We parked in a garage beneath a tall skyscraper-looking building. Traveling up the elevator, I felt no discomfort. I was excited to be welcomed home. As my father opened the door I was greeted by a small, but very loud, white dog. The stereotypical dog of Asian mothers.

“Dog name Dalgi. Strawberry. Skin pink.” My father said laughing as my mother situated Dalgi in a pink sweater.

“Are you hungry?” My mother asked through Papago.

I motioned that I was okay without any more food.

“We will order Korean fried chicken” my father said.



Is there such a thing as too much love?

So, my parents ordered *more* food for me and we snacked until it was time for bed.

As we prepared for bedtime, a portrait of a family lit up in the stillness of night. My father dressed down into a white t-shirt and striped pajama shorts. His eyes squinting for focus without his glasses. My mother took me to the bathroom, instructing me to wash my face. She squeezed skin care products into my hands, showing me how to pat my face. At the end, she handed me a face mask and told me to wind down in bed. My father slept in a room down the hall, but my mother stayed with me. She laid down next to me in a small bed. She stared at me lovingly, “jal jara.” “*Goodnight.*”

As I stared at my mother sleeping beside me, I felt reborn as child— as if my mother had taken me home from the hospital herself to tuck in her newborn daughter and relish in the bliss of motherhood.

The next morning my parents took me shopping at Costco. I know many Americans love Costco, but little do they know the beauty of Korean Costco. I walked around the store ogling at all the foods I had never seen before. My father wanted me to pick out food for a celebratory meal. My birthday was in a few days, and my parents wanted to find a way to celebrate while I was in Korea. As we walked through the store, my mother held my hand tightly. I picked out eel, one of my favorites. “Good por your lipor!” my dad said.

My mother stopped me in front of a clothing aisle, motioning at the rack in front of us with an array of tiny slippers. She asked me to pick out a pair for home. I chose tiny pink slippers with a cute character face on them.

After Costco, we went to a local grocery store, filled with the best fruits and vegetables I had ever seen. My eyes widened at the large pink peaches on display. My father told me to pick a few for breakfast. I touched a few peaches, like my American mother had taught me, to make sure they were ripe. My father, in stereotypical Asian father fashion, quickly told me to knock it off. “Take the one you touched!” The Holt packet on Korean etiquette failed to mention how to pick fruits with your father.

After shopping, we drove around the city and took a walk at a nice park. I told them about my interest in nature and how I love spiders. My father found it terrifying at first but pointed out a spider to me on a railing nearby. “Geomi,” he said as he pointed it out to me. “*Spider.*”

At the end of the walk, as we got in the car, my father's attitude shifted. His hearty demeanor turned into discomfort. He relayed to me that he would be meeting his son to switch cars. He told me his son was very kind and funny, and that he loves his son very much. I was nervous at this last-minute mention, as it wasn't clear if his son, my stepbrother, knew I existed. How would he react? Would he hate me? Would he be mad at me? Mad at my mother? Mad at my father?

We stopped on the side of a road in the city, and my father said my stepbrother would be there any minute. As my stepbrother approached, my father got out of the car. I watched as my father leaned in closely, whispering in my brother's ear. I saw my brother's expression turn to surprise for a brief moment. He shook his head up and down to signal understanding and opened the car door. He immediately smiled and greeted me in English, introducing himself as "Jeremy." He was extremely kind and friendly as we traveled through the countryside to see a peach orchard.

That night, we all had dinner together and celebrated my birthday. My mother made rice and we cooked eel on a griddle together. They sang happy birthday to me, and my brother even brought out a cake from Baskin Robins. He asked me what Korean music I knew. I said, "I know of BTS." I didn't really like BTS, but my brother did not pick up the subtle difference in language. My family played BTS for me for the remainder of my trip.

Through the night, we laughed and talked in my parents' living room in their cozy two-bedroom apartment. My stepfather left to give the car to my brother, and my mother sat across from me in silence. She began typing into her translation app. I could see a change in her demeanor.

She passed her phone to me. Her screen read, "I'm sorry". A tear rolled down her cheek. She explained the passing of my birth father and said she felt sorry for having to give me up. More tears softly streamed down her face as we passed the phone back and forth. Through tears of my own, I told her it was okay and that I was happy, but I know that I cannot erase her guilt. She handed me a large golden ring with a blue center stone engraved with a European-looking woman's portrait. After, she gave me her phone. "Promise me you will not drink and drive." She did not want to lose her daughter as she did my father.

When my stepfather returned, I had a solitary conversation with him as well. Using my limited Korean, I called him "appa" - the informal word for "father" in Korean. He

stared at me for a minute and then said to me in the best English he could, "It took your sister 7 years to call me dad."

When it was time for me to leave Korea and my parents, it felt like I had been there for 3 years and not 3 days. On the way to the airport, my father kept insisting that I not cry. He said that everything was happy. There was no need to be sad. We would see each other again.

As I lined up for the security check, my father sternly, but lovingly said, "*Do not cry.*" We all hugged and said our goodbyes, holding back tears. There was a wall to separate passengers waiting for the security check from the main lobby. I hid behind it and began to cry. I did not want to leave my parents so soon. The child in me pleading, "Do not leave me again!" There was a crack between panels in the nearly opaque separation wall. I saw a shadow on the other side and a small hand reach through the crack. It was my mother. I touched her hand one last time as we said goodbye. I could hear my father behind her, "DO NOT CRY!"

I maintain a positive relationship with my birth parents to this day, but we have had our ups and downs in the almost four years since meeting each other. I joke about needing the approval of four parents now instead of two, but the reality of a familial relationship set in when I got married in 2022. My partner and I had gotten courthouse married on short notice due to immigration, as he is from Canada, and I am from the U.S. I did not tell my birth parents until the day after. My birth mother was upset and questioned my decision. "Do not repeat my mistakes," she told me.

At the time, we were out of town for a funeral (yes, the day after we got married). My husband turned over to me in bed and asked why I looked so upset. I began sobbing. My mother's disapproval of my marriage terrified me. I thought that it may mean losing contact with her, and I was devastated. My mother called me shortly after and I could tell she and my father had talked with each other, as my father said, "We just want you to be happy. And we are happy for you." My mother did not say much.

After that, our relationship felt strained, but I feel it is mostly on my end and my fears feeding into it. My birth parents are my *parents*. Of course, they have opinions on how I live my life and the decisions I make because it is clear they love me. I believe they try their best to support me, even in disagreement, though it raises my anxiety to hear their disapproval voiced at times.

I once heard a quote from T.V. that was akin to, “The people you love the most are the people you fear the most,” and I believe that holds true for my birth parents and me. I fear their disapproval and I often irrationally fear my mother will stop contact with me if I make the wrong decisions.

In writing this, it is the first time I am publicly claiming my queer identity. I don’t take on any specific labels, but most people would describe my sexuality as bisexual. Before I married my partner, I had been exploring my identity and dating people of all genders. At some point, I told myself that ultimately, I would need to marry a straight cisgender man to maintain a relationship with my birth parents.

Do not get me wrong, I love my partner more than anything. He is my person, and I would not trade him for anybody. He is my greatest supporter and cheerleader. He is the only partner I have been able to talk to about my relationship with my birth family. I have broken up with people over not being able to comfortably share my experience— that is how much I trust him and love him. But there is a part of me that grieves the queerness that I sacrificed because of the fear of losing my birth family again.

I don’t truly know if my birth family would disapprove of my sexuality, but I strongly and firmly do not want to find out. My adoptive, and rather progressive, family and I haven’t even had that conversation. Though I do not think it is much of a talking point. It is simply part of my existence.

To my fellow adoptees, I know how much emotional labor often goes into our existence. I have found that even between my friends who have reconnected with birth families, our stories are so different, it is sometimes hard to not feel so isolated in my experience with both my adoptive and birth families.

Being able to put my story into words so many times, and even now, has been part of the healing and processing my adoption. This is not the first time I have written my story, nor the last. There is much I have left out in this version and much to be written as I grow older. What has healed me most in this specific piece is listing all the people who supported me and cared for me. There are many more people I haven’t mentioned. To name a few: the tattoo artist so moved by my story, they gave me free tattoos of my parents’ names, the date who introduced me to the tattoo artist, my friend Yunseo who happened to be in Korea at the same time and translated for me and my family, the many adoptees who have connected with me and shared their stories with me, especially my cowriter Zoey. We cried together as we processed our love and our pain. My Korean

tutors, my best friends and bridesmaids, my queer mentors, my professors, the Korean church I joined in Green Bay during my masters, my therapists, and many more.

Birth searches are difficult, even when successful and largely positive like mine. I felt like I had to navigate my birth search alone, and technically, I did. I did not share much about my process with others, and I did not want to. I did not feel ready to share my journey with others quite yet, especially with people I knew. I do not regret that, but I think it is important to find pockets of support where possible.

When I learned my birth father had died, that was the hardest part for me to process — Grieving somebody I loved so deeply but never had the chance to know. I ended up going to a therapist on campus. At the time, therapists were randomly assigned to students, and by some miracle, my therapist happened to be Korean, and that comforted me. I remember how terrified I was to finally tell somebody what I had been keeping inside. When I had my first session, I sat silently in the therapist's office, struggling to get the words to come out. Eventually, I tearfully blurted out, "MY DAD IS DEAD AND I DON'T KNOW HIM."

I don't think I had the best therapist at the time, but they helped me how they could, and I can appreciate the support they offered. In my masters, I felt much more comfortable with an on-campus therapist who is the parent of an adoptee. I enjoyed that we learned so much from each other, and I felt extremely supported and comforted by them.

My fellow adoptees, know I send you my love, and I hope reading this has somehow helped. Know that we share so much of our journey, you and I, but yours is still so unique and all your own. You are strong simply for existing— living a life that was chosen for you by others. And though you are strong, do not be afraid to be weak. You, more than anyone else, deserve to feel every emotion under the sun.

If you are reading this, and you are not an adoptee, thank you for taking time to listen to adoptee voices. So often, people try to tell our stories for us or reframe the narrative to fit their idea of adoption. Please continue to listen with an open heart and an open mind. We need support and we need allies, even if we do not always say it.

Thank you for listening to my story, reader. Thank you.

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## Jose Taborda

*Born in Colombia, raised in the USA*

In the spring of 1978, I was born in Medellin, Colombia. Separated from my first family by adoption, I was brought by my adoptive parents to New Jersey and grew up with my younger adoptive sister in a Northern New Jersey suburb just outside of New York City.

I was lucky as an adoptee because my adoptive parents made a conscious decision to talk to me about my adoption from an early age. They attended a couple of workshops about adopting a child offered by an adoption agency prior to my adoption where they had been counselled to inform me as soon as possible about my adoption so as to normalise it for me. This advice informed their approach in terms of collecting information and artefacts of my adoption. This included stories of my adoption in Colombia in the form of journal entries written by my adoptive mother, a photograph of my first mother, and my adoption records containing identifying information about my first mother.

Upon reflection, it wasn't just luck and good advice, my parents were compassionate people who made the decision to share what they knew about my origins with me throughout my life. They had the right instincts that led them not only to send me a dossier containing every artefact about my adoption while I was in college and I first expressed an interest in searching, but also to support my search when I began.

When I moved to New York City in my mid-twenties, I started searching. At the time, I had a Yahoo! Email account and noticed that it offered searchable interest groups. There was a group called Colombian Adoptee Search and Support (CASAS), which gathered many people like me: twenty-something Colombian adoptees who grew up around New York City and living in the area! I was shocked to find hundreds of people who were sharing resources about searching, so I started making connections and attending meetups and dinners in Brooklyn and Manhattan where we enjoyed sharing stories and Latino fare.

Through these meetups, I had gotten the contact information of a private investigator in Medellin with whom I started to interact about my search. Because I had identifying information about my first mother, it took him two weeks to find her. A couple



weeks after that, I had my first phone call with her. As one can imagine, finding my first mother within a month of beginning my search was all a whirlwind and very overwhelming. My excitement got the best of me, and I dove right into making plans for a reunion. Well, all of this came as a shock to my adoptive mother and sister, who weren't as excited as me. They felt threatened by my news. I remember spending a lot of time convincing them that I wasn't trying to replace them, but rather, it would be an opportunity to learn about my origins. They were not convinced that it was so simple. Searching for first family by adoptees may bring up many past trauma wounds for all members of the adoption constellation. I have heard stories of adoptees shying away from doing any searching while their adoptive parents are still alive due to the raw emotions around adoption that are very rarely acknowledged and dealt with during an adoptive family's time living together. And when the possibility of a reunion arises, adoptees may find themselves having to reckon with these complicated emotions. This reckoning is not our responsibility as adoptees, but it may be an unanticipated and unwelcome reality that adoptees must face when searching and reuniting with first family.

Coincidentally, the film "Las Hijas" was going to be screened. It was timely that Maria Quiroga, a local filmmaker, was releasing the film profiling three female Colombian adoptees and their reunions with first family. So I invited my mother and sister to join me. It was an interesting experience because the filmmaker handled the subject matter responsibly in presenting the reality of how complicated reunions between adoptees and first family can be. It helped to see this objective perspective on the emotionally charged situation that was playing out for us. It provided a context for our sensitive conversations, and it helped us to understand that we were not the only ones experiencing the feelings we were. Despite all of that, we continued to have conversations that required my soothing their frayed feelings around my upcoming reunion.

One thing that stands out for me now sixteen years later as I reflect on my reunion as a young man, is that I did not pursue any mental health support to guide me on that complicated endeavour. In my local adoptee community, the discussion was more centred on the topic of search and reunion in my memory and not as much on adoption mental health issues. However, I acknowledge there is a high likelihood my antenna wasn't tuned to that particular signal, so to speak. More recently, I have read a lot of highly-respected literature about adoption and mental health including *The Primal Wound* by Nancy Verrier and *Journey of the Adopted Self* by Betty Jean Lifton to name a couple of outstanding examples. I am a regular listener to adoptee podcasts including *Adoptees On* with host Haley Radke and *Adapted* with host Kaomi Lee among others. I have met many adoptees and I am lucky to live close to an adoptee organization called *Also Known As, Inc.* that

hosts meet ups for transracial, intercountry adoptees. Wise adoptees and adoption professionals these days counsel adoptees who are engaged in reunion to set some boundaries that include having a third-party present during reunion meetings, not staying with first family right away, and pursuing therapy before, during, and after reunion. I did none of those things.

All of this gathering of resources and self-education on the intersection of adoption and mental health has demonstrated to me that I took a very impetuous, uninformed, and quite risky path on my reunion journey. I stayed with my first mother and her family for three weeks at their home in an outlying municipality of Medellin. I do have very positive memories from my first visit in 2006 that led me to return in the two subsequent years. However, somewhere down the line some members of my first family started to develop expectations that involved money. It was not much at first, but, with time, their boldness grew. This expectation made me uncomfortable because I didn't want to have to explain to any of them that I am a professional in a field that is not very highly-compensated. To them, I was just the more fortunate one who was able to escape their humble circumstances. No matter how difficult my personal situation was, they are right that I had many more opportunities in the U.S. than they did in Colombia, but I did not feel that it was my responsibility to have to provide for them. I wanted to just get to know them knowing that it would take time to develop a family bond. Truly, I faced hard feelings when they asked for money and that made things very confusing for me. While I know that my experience is not unique, I wished that it wasn't part of my reunion story. At some point, I stopped contacting them because it all became too much for me. This is where an intervention such as adoption-focused therapy would have been helpful.

Some years passed and I turned the page on my adoption by quite literally ceasing to think about my adoption and pausing all the actions I had taken to learn about my origins during my twenties. I turned thirty, I got married and became a new father, and I wanted to focus on my new family in Brooklyn. I was also in graduate school, so juggling responsibilities was the theme starting in 2010. Since that time, a lot has changed.

Nowadays, I am divorced, I am co-parenting a budding teenager, and I have settled into a career as a college educator. As I moved into middle-age, I became more introspective, and I found myself interrogating some difficult feelings that felt like depression and anxiety. When I realised that I did not have easy answers to that line of inquiry, I began searching for ways to remove barriers to happiness that had started showing up. It started to dawn on me that my adoption may be the cause of some of my bad decisions in life and the source of a feeling of malaise that crept in every now and



again. I remember once sitting on a beach in the Rockaways with my best friend and confidant of many years and reflecting out loud that I should look into therapy for adoption to try to answer some nagging questions.

About six months after that conversation in 2021, I got around to doing some basic internet searching and was amazed by what I found. There was so much work that had been done in the intervening years since I started my search. As I previously mentioned, I went down a path of self-education, I engaged in some adoption-focused group therapy, and I have been attending online and in-person support groups made up of adoptees since that discovery. I have learned so much about myself and adoption since I started to reconnect to my adopted-self. Some of it has been difficult, but I am very happy to have opened myself up to feel, meditate, inquire, grieve, and build community. It is cliché, but I wish I knew during my reunion and prior what I know now.

In short, I hope that adoptees who are on the bold path of searching and reuniting with first family will take careful, well-informed steps. I know from my experience that there are no easy answers, and reunion may be when many hard questions rise to the surface. However, that search for the discovery and recovery of self and identity is worth it all because even if one does not find first family, there is so much to learn about oneself along the way.

I hope that adoptees take the time to explore all of the particular intersections of adoption and mental health including, but not limited to, the Primal Wound theory, the post-traumatic stress implications of adoption, ambiguous loss, and the Adoptee Consciousness Model. Most definitely read the two books by Verrier and Lifton previously mentioned. Check out Damon Davis' podcast *Who Am I Really?*, and the two others previously mentioned. Read JaeRan Kim's brilliant blog *Harlow's Monkey*. If looking for a therapist in the U.S., check out Dr. Chaitra Wirta-Leiker's adoptee therapist directory curated on her website *Grow Beyond Words*. If one does not have the money to pursue therapy, there are plenty of books, podcasts, and support groups that could provide information and resources helpful in informing decisions around searching, finding, and reunion with first family. Just start checking out all of the amazing resources on Lynelle Long's comprehensive treasure of a website *InterCountry Adoptee Voices*. Search on Facebook for a group you can join that holds online support groups, or, even better, search for a local group in your area to meet up in person with adoptees. A great place to search for a local group in the U.S. is on Pamela A. Karanova's website *Adoptees Connect*.

The above is just a cursory glance at some of the most salient resources I have found that have nourished my soul as I step into more consciousness about my adoption on my journey of self-discovery. My greatest hope is that someone reading these words may find something in them to hold onto.

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## Renate Van Geel

*Born in South Korea, raised in Belgium*

I was born in South Korea in September 1984. After 4 months I was displaced to Belgium in order to be adopted. Growing up I never really wondered where I came from. I would have forgotten about 'it' if I wouldn't have been reminded of my looks by others. At the age of 28, I was pregnant myself. Suddenly, I realised I wasn't born from a plane but from a woman that carried me for 9 months and had to let me go after giving birth to me. I couldn't believe anymore that my adoptive parents didn't hold any information (what I always was been told), so I started looking all around our house and found a file full of information. This turned out to be false but I did look up the adoption agency in South Korea and much to my surprise I found they did provide some post adoption services, including family search. With no awareness at all on the topic, I filled out a form to look for my parents because I could, rather than because I wanted to. But a few months later my adoption agency, Social Welfare Society (SWS), let me know the police had found my mother.

Let me say, I always find it awkward to tell this story, knowing that so many adoptees search a lifetime, I almost feel ashamed that it went for free and was so easy for me.

It was emotional to see the pictures of my family and to read letters of my mother, my father, my 2 sisters and my brother but I told them I could never come and visit them because my adoptive mother would find that too painful. I was so stuck in the 'fog' and into loyalty...I almost can't believe myself.

I also felt anger towards my mother. I felt hurt and rejected by her and couldn't believe anyone could 'give away' their child, specially having a newborn myself. I realise now that reality for our mothers was so much more complicated and I rather think of it as women being forced by circumstances to give up their child, not as a 'free, voluntary choice'.

I know that dynamics of anger, rejection, push and pull, hurting and being hurt,... often (if not always) make reunions so complicated. All the hurt, trauma, guilt, grief and pain of everyone involved (adoptee, parents, siblings,...) often prevent the possibility of growing some kind of bond together before even meeting each other.

At the time I was so angry with them, I completely ignored their messages and emails. But my family was able to stand their ground, to 'stay', not leave, until I was ready. Only this gave me the possibility to connect with them later on in life.

When my adoptive mother died (my adoptive father had died long before) I finally started to feel what I felt: I really wanted to go to Korea and meet my family again for the first time. Only then, 8 years after I found them, I did a DNA test through SWS. I was quite sure about the outcome since I look exactly like one of my sisters but anything is possible in the land of adoption.

So during COVID I went to Korea to meet them again for the first time and stayed with my parents for 2 weeks in quarantine. It was an intense and overwhelming experience. One that I'd love everyone to have but at the same time wouldn't recommend to anyone.

I regressed to a small child that loved to be fed, held and indulged by her parents and siblings. My mother also felt like she was 36 years younger again, she wanted to bathe me, feed me and sleep together. So for 3 weeks we could hold onto the illusion where I was still the baby and child she could care for. I think we both cherished this deeply, at least I did.

To take my place as my parents' daughter allowed me to grow into an adult and to take my position as an adult, caring, giving mother for my own children.

When I had to leave for Belgium again, she lost quite some hair and told me she found it so difficult and painful to see me leave again.

Her own process started also. Even though I did see her again once, actually she withdrew from our contact. Since I left after that first visit, she doesn't answer my messages, says she doesn't want to see me, leaves family group chats, etc. After some time also my sisters and brother started to ghost me, so even though we started off so well, we are no longer in touch at the moment.

Rationally I totally get this secondary rejection. Too often the impact on our birth families is easily forgotten. But they too suffer existential loss, trauma and grief. Where we have other adoptees to relate to, adoption competent therapists (if not too many), language to express pain and trauma, my mother, father and siblings have none of this.

My experience is that my adoption agency in Korea doesn't know how to or doesn't want to function as a translator to bridge between the cultural, emotional and social barriers either.

Does it hurt, this secondary rejection? Extremely. I think we all felt this way when we had to leave our mothers, families, countries and cultures as a child. To experience it as an adult, over and over again in a way, is truly agonising.

When I wanted to visit them during covid I had little eye for anything else other than my own (childish) needs, I could hardly take into account other perspectives or interests than my own.

But differently from then and 38 years ago, I'm an adult now and I choose to 'stay', just like my family did for me when I ignored them ten years ago, and I will wait to see if either one of them will ever be ready to connect again. I can see and feel the whole that I'm a part of, it is not just about me, so I'm able to stick around.

In my heart I know that, in a way, I will always be looking for my mother and that I will miss her for the rest of my life, even if she does turn up again.

Adoption is no fairytale. Finding doesn't come with a happy ending. At the most, it can mean a new chapter, a complicated, intense and painful one, raising new topics and questions all the way along.

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## Mikati Willemyns

*Born in Vietnam, raised in Belgium*

I was born in 1994 and adopted to Belgium in June 1995 at 7 months of age. I currently live in Kortrijk in West-Flanders, Belgium. My childhood was in Anzegem, not so far from Kortrijk.

I have been able to develop and grow up in Belgium. I have some dear friends. I have a nice job. Over the years I have made beautiful trips in and out of Europe and met many people. I have done two studies – orthopedagogy and social work. Here I learned how important human, children’s and women’s rights are. I have been working for a non-profit organization for years. I follow up families in socially vulnerable situations and connect them with a student who is studying at the college or university. I did not study to be a teacher, but it is true that I do train students about how they can work with vulnerable families, how they can reflect on their actions, etc.

My childhood wasn’t all that fantastic. As an intercountry adoptee, I grew up in a white environment. That environment had little respect for my original roots. Sometimes I would walk down the street and hear racial slurs from people I didn’t know. As much as I tried to assimilate, I didn’t forget my roots.

My Vietnamese name is *Pham Thi Hoa Sen* which says a lot about what my life has been like. I grew up to turn out beautiful but I grew up in mud just like a lotus flower. A thorough screening could have prevented a lot. My adoptive parents are not bad people and they did their best, but they underestimated the care needed for children adopted internationally. My adoptive mother already had two children from a previous marriage that she was no longer allowed to see. She was mentally unable to raise children. My adoptive parents are burdened by trauma that they have not worked through. At that time there was also little to no psychological support and guidance for adoptive parents. It was very difficult growing up with them. It is by seeking help for myself and talking to people about it, that I am more aware of life. Just because you mean well and have good intentions does not mean that you are acting right.

1.5 years ago I decided to take a DNA test through MyHeritage (a commercial DNA-kit). To get a bit of an indication of where my roots come from. Through the result I got a little more information about ethnicity and I saw distant relatives. It was cool to know

something because I know very little about my roots. I hadn't looked at MyHeritage in a long time until early December 2022. I have no idea why exactly as I didn't even get a notification. To my surprise, I saw that I had a new match. It wasn't just any distant relative, it was my brother! He lived in a neighbouring country, France!

You have to know that I just woke up when I looked at my mobile phone, so I immediately sent a message to some close friends and my guidance counsellor at the Descent Center. I wanted to know if I was dreaming. Finally I got the confirmation from the experts at the Descent Center that my DNA result were real and we share over 2500 centimorgans! That means he is not half but rather, a full brother.

I was so happy! So many emotions raced through my body that day. I saw a lot of people who were also adopted at an event that day. Most of them were a great support. Most were as happy and moved as I was. A minority reacted rather short, jealous or gave unsolicited advice about anything and everything. I also understand their feelings. It is an exceptional situation that triggers many emotions. Those emotions of others made it sometimes overwhelming for me.

I contacted Georges through Facebook. I wondered if he had already seen it. When he didn't reply, a friend gave me his LinkedIn profile that had his email address on it. I felt like a little stalker but I decided to send him an email as well. I sent him a little text and gave him the option to get in touch if he wanted to. When he answered, he introduced himself and asked a few questions. The contact was open, enthusiastic and friendly. So we are very sure of the DNA match, but some mysteries soon surfaced quickly during the first conversation. We told each other what name we got on our adoption papers. Our last names are different. I see on my adoption papers that I have the same last name as my mother. Maybe he has the father's last name? Georges has not yet properly looked at his adoption papers, so there are still pieces of the puzzle missing.

I am happy when I connect with my brother. The contact feels so natural! We talk and joke like we have known each other for years. We both got a little emotional when we talked about our childhood but also realised how close geographically we grew up. Georges is barely 14 months younger than me. Did the orphanage ever talk to my adoptive parents and suggest taking Georges too? So that we could grow up together? What would my adoptive parents do in such a situation? With a reunion, the search for one's identity is not over. In fact, it has opened up many more questions!

I have my reasons for wanting to find my parents. Under Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child has a right to information about his or her parentage. It is also fundamental in human beings to know where they come from. As long as I don't know the story about my biological parents, I can't be mad. I really wonder what their story is. I know it's going to be hard to search. I know that commercial DNA testing is less used in Vietnam. Papers and names were sometimes forged. I don't know if my mom actually came from My Tho. Is her name really Tuyet Mai? Right now I'm looking at it mostly inquisitively and with compassion. I want to look at the bigger picture. Why is it that parents are faced with the decision to give up a child? How can a system support parents so that such things do not have to happen again?

Recently a Vietnamese woman contacted me on social media. She told me why she had given up her child in the same orphanage as Georges and I. It has not been easy for her to find out where her child went and she continues to search for her child, even if it was more than 20 years ago. She is still saddened by the situation. If anyone can help us broaden this search, please see [here](#).

I have lost contact with my adoptive parents, so they know nothing about my search. I'm sure my adoptive mother would have disapproved.

It would be nice if we find our parents, but we'll see. I am very grateful for [Phuc](#) who has offered to help us search. He seems very nice. I hear from other adoptees that he is friendly and reliable. I also read articles about him and it's unbelievable what he does to bring families together! I would find it courageous if families dare to come out for what was difficult in the past and why they gave up their child. By telling their story as biological parents, even if they feel ashamed, our society can learn and improve the future.

There are adoptees whose biological parents thought their baby was stillborn but it was actually sold for adoption. If that's the case with our parents, they don't even know we are alive. Our story can be everything. It's hard to know what our case was. I have so many unanswered questions and I would like to know my family's story. If I were to see my biological mother again, the first thing I would tell her is that I would like to get to know her and listen to her story.

Vietnam will always be special to me, even though I didn't grow up there. I was 9 years old when I went back with my adoptive parents and my sister (non biological) who



is also adopted. We went from North to South. Even though my adoptive mother was negative about Vietnam, she couldn't ruin it for me. The food, the smiling people, the chaos in Ho Chi Minh and the nature in smaller villages have stayed with me. Now I'm reading more about Vietnam and talking more to Vietnamese people. I am saving up to travel to Vietnam again. Maybe alone, maybe with friends or maybe with Georges. We'll see. But I certainly will go back and learn more about my beautiful country.

What I've learnt about searching is that reunion can also change your relationship with your own environment and a reunion may trigger others. Just like adoption, a reunion is not a fairy tale. It's a new chapter in a book we don't know the end of. A good network, your own resilience and time are important elements to lead that story in a better way.

You can follow Mikati and her journey at [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

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## Liza Zoellick

*Born in Colombia, raised in the USA*

I was born in Bogota, Colombia in 1974 and was then adopted out to the United States. My adoptive parents are both immigrants. I wasn't ever certain that I wanted to find out exactly where I came from. As an adopted child, I often make up stories in my head about why I wasn't wanted and why my parents put me up for adoption. Those stories are also, at least in part, fuelled by others. Whether it's our parents explaining why, or strangers, I ended up with enough information to create pretty interesting stories. Stories that my emotional brain could deal with better than the truth.

My journey began around 2010, with a DNA test from Ancestry.com. Beyond my curiosity about my birth parents, I was curious about my genetic composition. The question that had been posed my entire life was, "Where are you from?" The simple answer, Colombia. But I had no idea if both my birth parents came from Colombia or if my past was more complex. It was truly amazing when I received the results and I could see where I came from; and, even more interesting is it is always evolving with more and more people taking DNA tests.

My adoptive parents know I am searching for my biological family, but they do not know many of the things I have found out along the way. The first was the birth certificate I carried all my 48 years, was not my original and, my original birth certificate was altered to show my adoptive parents as if they were my biological parents. I have also learned that many of the adoptions from Colombia, are in fact, fraudulent. Many of these families were lied to by people they trusted and conned into giving their children up for adoption. I learned that Colombia was in the throes of war and that adoption, or in fact the selling of children, was very profitable and many children were stolen from their birth families and adopted to wealthy western families.

I think this is one of the things adoptees should consider when looking for biological families. You may learn, or discover things that you weren't at all prepared to find out. I was not prepared to find out that my biological mother and father may not have wanted to give me up at all — that they may have been struggling financially and thought the people appearing to help them were actually only helping themselves financially. My biological parents were certainly not expecting to find themselves without their child.

That these people in authority took advantage of people in the cruelest fashion, leaving me, the child - displaced - without country, culture, language or family; it is heartbreaking, and truly one of the most painful truths to come to terms with from my search.

Backtracking a bit to the DNA, I have discovered many cousins all over the world, including the state I currently live in. I have also discovered that many of my closest identified cousins from Colombia don't necessarily want to speak to me, despite my efforts in writing to them. Getting any kind of new information is slow and emotionally exhausting.

I am beginning the process of sending the Central Authority in Colombia (ICBF) all kinds of information in hopes of them being able to give me the names of my parents, but I know it is their prerogative to do so. I also know it has been 48 years since my birth and those records may be lost to time. The process of searching is taxing and painful. I am constantly reminded of what I lost. My birth certificate is basically blank, aside from my birth parents surname listed as my parents. There is something haunting about looking at that document because I feel like I belong to no-one.

As far as a search organisation or search angel, I have used a lady and her fiancé. They were able to obtain my birth certificate and the total was just shy of \$100. It was not easy to trust their intentions, and to be completely honest, my husband was skeptical and concerned, but when you are an adoptee, the need to know is almost overpowering and it leaves you vulnerable. I relied on their reputation on Facebook and given how open they were about whom they were helping, I feel like I got lucky. I would advise adoptees to be careful. Look at who you are going to entrust with whatever task and see if you can obtain any reviews from others who have used them. Losing money on top of any information you were seeking would just be gutting. I also think it is important to seek therapy during your search. It's almost inevitable that an adoptee will learn something traumatising. It's not always about your adoption, sometimes it's just trying to process why your biological family doesn't want to speak to you.

When I was young, I never questioned the privacy of biological parents/ families. Sometimes, bad things happen to people and when the result of that trauma is a child, I understood deeply why you may not want to face that. As an adult my opinion has changed because that child didn't ask to be born and while it's great that my biological mother gave me life, she could have also given me a name and a history, even if she didn't keep me. So many adoptees know absolutely nothing about where they came

from, never mind the circumstances or any health history from their parents. As adoptees, we go through life being surprised by every illness that has a genetic component. It's difficult!

I am still searching for my biological family and if I never learn in this lifetime, I'm grateful that I have the resources to look. I've also discovered a third cousin in my town, and we are working toward building a relationship. It's something I never thought I would have. I try to maintain hope - but that doesn't mean there aren't days when I utterly breakdown. I have learnt to give myself permission to grieve because the loss is absolutely incalculable. I would advocate for all adoptions to be open, if there must be adoption. Ideally, I would like more resources given to pregnant women to be able to raise their children because even though I do love my adoptive parents, there is so much loss in my life. I lost a country. I lost parents. I lost language. I lost extended family. All these things I will never know. It hurts.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my feelings as an adoptee.