Adoption Shame
By
Sasha Frugone

Shame clung to me like a hand-me-down stitched too small—tight at the throat, impossible to ignore.

Adoption—no matter how loving or well-intentioned—begins with loss. For many adoptees, especially those adopted before the age of reason, it also creates trauma: abandonment without language, separation without explanation, and a rupture in trust at the center of identity. Without context, children often translate that absence into a single devastating belief: *It was my fault*.

The shame I carried was not born in me. The world taught it to me:

1. A society that taught me the mirror proved my inferiority—one that treated my country of origin, its people, and its history as disposable, and implied that nothing worth keeping could come from Korea, including me.
2. The demand for assimilation: the message that to be acceptable, I had to become as white, compliant, and culturally erased as possible.
3. Cruel stories about Korean children and their origins—stories meant to brand us with shame before we were old enough to resist it.
4. Caretakers who made me feel my right to stay had to be earned through silence, obedience, and sexual service.
5. Adults unwilling to hear me, protect me, or intervene when I needed them most.
6. Every so-called “solution” that tried to fix me instead of confronting what had been done to me.

Unlearning what shame teaches is harder than learning it in the first place.

Rebuilding a core identity requires guidance, safety, and truth. It is painful work. Old scar tissue must be cut away so something stronger can grow in its place.

Shame sat so heavily in my body that it took years to walk into a room without apologizing for existing. Longer still to meet anyone's eyes.

Shame had taught me that "no" was a word I was never meant to use.

I tried with everything I had to become white. Before I was seven, I believed that if people did not see my profile, they would not know that I was Asian. For a year, I moved through the world in rigid, anxious choreography, keeping my face turned forward at all times.

I could not imagine anything good or beautiful about me. I felt "less than" especially when I was alone. I had learned my lesson of shame thoroughly.

I learned to hate my body because I had been taught to hate what it revealed about me.

Much of this harm could have been reduced—or stopped—by meaningful follow-up, accountability, and post-adoption support.

We require teachers to keep learning because children's well-being depends on it. Adoption should be no different. If we entrust adults with the lifelong responsibility of raising adopted children, we must also require lifelong, trauma-informed education and meaningful post-

adoption support. Love is not enough without accountability, preparation, and care.