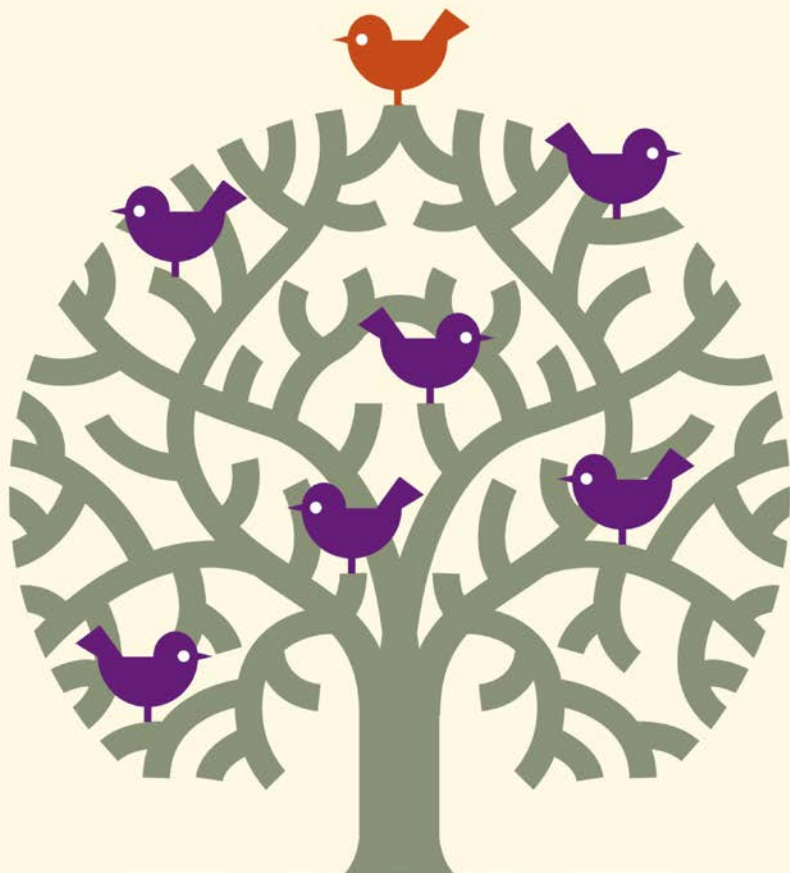


THE ADOPTEE'S JOURNEY

Cameron Lee Small

From loss and trauma to
healing and empowerment



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MISSING FAMILY

*Auntie holds you a bit tighter and whispers, “괜찮아 . . .”
Her cheek presses next your ear as you walk together with Uncle,
“Kwaenchanah . . . Kwaenchanah . . . It’s okay . . . It’s okay . . .”
You never saw the box get lowered into
the ground. But you could feel it.*

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, when our two-year-old wakes up, I bring him into bed with us. I snuggle him up between my spouse and me. He holds his favorite blanket tight in one arm and with the other he reaches over to touch my face and shoulder. He does this every few minutes until he falls asleep. Sometimes, he’ll even call me out through the dark, “Dadaaa, whey ah yooooo?” “I’m here, buddy. Time to let our bodies rest. Good night.”

I turn to give him a final squeeze and kiss the top of his head, then drop back down to my pillow with a sleepy exhale.

Advocacy is rarely a story about people who have something to lose. It’s usually about those who’ve already suffered the unthinkable but would rather die than let it consume the others.



You have an experience that no one else can touch. You're also united irreversibly to an ever-growing adoptee kinship, and humanity too. Distinguished from others, but like many adoptees you're here in your story through public realities beyond your control and possibly beyond your imagination. In this book you have a map to help you process what it means to bear that truth even when the deadliest forces of antagonism plot against you. Against us.

IN THE BEGINNING

Many of our families were dead to begin with. At least, *socially*. And then declared so through institutionalized transfers of legal, residential, and relational custody. Something happened to my family; rather, something didn't happen. Then, I was adopted.

While your adoption story may not include a physical death, adoptions and funerals are alike in that they both turn natural facts into a social event. Their difference lies in how much we wonder if one could be avoided more than the other. And who's to say what's natural and what's not? Who's first? Who's a mother?

Your medical records might be non-history as far as curiosity is concerned, let alone useful documentation for preventive and diagnostic care. There may even be a lack of clarity regarding how you were relinquished and identified by systems of child welfare in the first place. You have reasons to doubt. For some adoptees, death and life become so vaguely indistinguishable, it's no wonder you might struggle to make sense of one in your quest to honor the other.

The social death is surgical. Your birth certificate may include your adoptive name with no mention of the one given to you at birth. Or the one assigned to you at birth may have been penciled in by a social worker, and then re-configured into the words adoptive parents assign. Typography happens to honor and bury us under first and last names, maybe even brand-new sets

of clothes and fresh linen. Not all biography can hide, though. When we leave the house we're still identified as an outsider. The words parents give aren't weighty enough to keep the stone in place. As if who we are is too alive to stay put in new soil. For a child, and even still for some adults, that's not always perceived as a strength, so we might develop our own creative ways to hide our face and deny our history. The amount of cognitive and emotional bandwidth it all takes from us is extraordinary.

Adoptees have always been trying, though. Speaking. Performing. Responding to the event. Enduring the process. Resisting. Only recently, though, have we and our families been given formal, accessible platforms to make provision for what's been lost through relinquishment and adoption; and how it shapes the course of our development immediately, actively, and over a lifetime.

Without considering the contextualized history of the adoptee community, the lack of adoptee representation looks like we just don't have anything to say on the matter. You might even conclude that anything *you* have to say about it doesn't matter. However, we're served and we serve those around us when we're willing to explore the dialogue from different angles. Participate in it, too.

Key Point: The more you can discern your relationship to personal and collective adoptee histories, including nuances that are often contradictory yet continually in process, the more effective and empowered you can be to influence the world and what happens next in your life as an adoptee.

If you want to understand what's going on in your life today, it makes sense you'd need to have a fundamental awareness about what happened yesterday. But the process through which we can make sense of that information can be confused with loaded questions, misleading answers, and unsettling promises. As uncomfortable as it may seem, though, our participation makes a difference.

THINKING ABOUT ADOPTION

We humans seem to be born wired for an assurance of things unseen. For example, object permanence is a developmental capacity that guides our actions in reference both to a here and now and a there and then. I wouldn't be surprised if it has to do with some combination of survival and salvation. How else could another country become a reality here on earth or within our hearts?

Dr. Adam Kim and his colleagues introduced a psychological measurement called the Birth Family Thoughts Scale. It was created to help researchers and practitioners understand more about the lived experiences of transracial and international adoptees.

- I think about my birth parents.
- I wonder about whether my parents ever think about me.
- I think about whether or not I am similar to my birth parents.
- I wondered about brothers and sisters in Korea.
- I am curious about my Korean name.
- I imagine what it would have been like to have grown up in Korea.¹

According to the history collected by Eastern Child Welfare Society, my mom was an extrovert, and my dad an introvert, while he was alive.

Those details may seem inconsequential to the average person. But, for me as an adoptee, I've grown to receive any information about my family and origin story as a gift. And as a kind of pain inevitable with childbirth, as if relinquishment and adoption induce a lifelong extension of someone's delivery.

MY BEGINNING

Busan is a natural beauty. The land itself is something you can't make up. I've seen it. I was born there. My parents were, too. Dal-Mi was kind, funny, and carefree. Seon-Ho was quiet, serious, and passionate. Each in their early twenties when they started

dating. They'd walk hand in hand along the ocean-view backdrop that today gives around 3.4 million people a perfect place to pray or party any day of the week. It's where they'd take off their shoes, dig for gold, laugh, and chase sand crabs around with their illegitimate toddler.

Olympic rings were just around the corner. For a 1980s Korea, it was a chance to be adored on the world's stage. It could be a city on a hill despite its body being severed in half by war thirty years earlier and its mind harried from an atrocious thirty-five-year colonization by Japan. Korea's internment camps, branded as "Social Purification Projects," were also beginning to synchronize, some even in partnership with a local church presence that likely operated in the shadows of the Holt family's ministry. To nourish a glittering post-war economy, "welfare centers" began to protect their beautiful peninsula from "rough sleepers, disabled people, some orphan children, and even ordinary citizens who just failed to show their identification when asked." Not only were there rumors of people disappearing, but there were also government-sanctioned rules to incite the sudden abductions.² It is not insignificant how our basic human desire to be seen and loved lays out to countless ends and imprints across the earth.

For Dal-Mi and Seon-Ho, it brought them together in home and heart. It changed their names to "Omma" and "Appa." They named me Hee-Seong. I was their son. They were my world. And amid Korea's struggle to breathe, we shared meals, dreamed, and woke up together as a family for three years.

YESTERDAY

Imagine portrait-worthy sunrises mingled with breezy ocean air and a perma-loop soundtrack of pulsing waves and hungry seagulls. In our bedroom, a gentle glow forms a warm outline around makeshift blackout curtains. The smallest touch of light is enough to give me the zip of an energizer bunny. Mornings began

with Omma and Appa praying for a few more minutes of sleep as I rolled around on their bed like they were all my personal bouncy house. Something catches my attention. A gift I received for my birthday last month. I turn onto my belly and slide backward onto the floor.

Omma grabs my arm, “Careful, don’t fall!”

I crouch down for a moment, “Daddy, see??”

My eyes are fixed as I lower a wooden puzzle piece into its place. In colorful Hangul font it says, “가족” (ka-jok; family).

I look up at Appa. He smiles, “Doesn’t fit.”

I study the board and try again. With his head still resting on the pillow, he lifts his hand out from under the blanket. I try my best to land mine into his. It makes the sound you’d hear if a high five could whisper.

Then our fingers interlock and he gives my three-year-old hand a big squeeze, “잘하셨어, 사랑해!” (Well done, Hee-Seong! Love you!)

After lunch we splash around in the sun and draw shapes in the sand. Omma kneels down to trace a heart with her finger. I recognize part of my name in the middle “Hee!”

White frothy waves break into a thousand bubbles and wash it away,

“Omma! See!” I point to the spot where it disappeared.

Omma puts her hands up and acts surprised, “Where did you go, Hee-Seong?!”

“Right here!” I laugh and run to her. She heaves me up into her arms and hugs me tight as if her body has a memory-foam squeeze made just for me.

Cherry blossoms are at their peak in April so we pack up our things and start making our way toward a nearby festival. We stop near a group of people crowded around an open patio. A local resident serenades us from behind a worn-down Martin acoustic.

I can't understand the words, but the phrase "Jack and Diane" stays with me all day.

There were always hints of savory street food here and there, and sometimes we'd try some. For dinner tonight, Omma and Appa splurge on fresh grilled meat with the kind of banchon that hides the table. There's sizzling and smoke and upbeat music. Under warm yellow streetlights, Appa washes spice off the kimchi for me. Omma wraps rice and beef into lettuce and stuffs my face.

I reach for the little green bottle, but Appa blocks my hand, "ㅇㄴ (ah-ni, no). Here, Hee-Seong-ah, drink this."

The bottom of my cup slowly goes up, and when it's finished I look at Appa with a satisfying, "Ahhh. ooyoo!" (milk).

DREAM

Sometimes, aunts and uncles (Imo and Samchon) would stop by to join us, or we'd go farther into the city and visit them a while. Wherever it was, I'd climb onto their laps and ask them to play, making a motion with my hand. We'd walk out to the sidewalk, and they'd swing me around like a helicopter.

I'd still be there pleading, "Keep going!! Again!" if we had the time.

After sunset we would watch high schoolers, date-night lovers, and off-the-clock employees light fireworks near the water. As a three-year-old, I was hypnotized by the colors and crackling lights against the nighttime backdrop. Every now and then I'd get to wave around sparklers with Omma and Appa.

These were all treasures in the dark. Before I knew what treasures were and how quickly they could pass away.

They'd softly inform me it was time to go home. I was not happy with that. The only comfort was that we'd have another chance to be there together.

"Kwaenchanah . . . Kwaenchanah . . . It's okay, it's okay, we'll come out again soon, Hee-Seong-ah!"

We always came back. I knew I could count on it.

My feet and ankles would still be wet and covered with sand while Omma and Appa took turns to carry me. Sometimes we'd cap our routine at home with stories and games together on the bed. Appa would pretend to sleep. I'd hug his arm and yell, "Morning!!"

He'd jump up and look around, "Where am I?" and I'd laugh uncontrollably for a few seconds until he fell asleep again. No matter how many times it went on, I'd have energy left. "Keep going!!"

On other nights I'd be sound asleep by the time we returned. There was just enough moonlight through the windows to guide them through the doorway, clean what they could, and transfer me back into our room. I'd be lowered softly into bed and soon our place was quiet; all three of us dreaming again until daybreak.

It wasn't paradise, but we were closer to it than I had grown up believing. I learned that eventually. My imagination often returns to what I've heard in person and what the agency document says about us, "She [mom] lived a happy life with them then."

FAMILY

Dear Hee-Seong,

It's been three days since you've seen Appa. He was lying still in an upright position, asleep in a hospital bed. You saw him covered with bandages, a brace around his neck, and tubes hooked up to his arms and neck. A machine close by beeped out a pulse from his heart. You hugged Appa's arm and put your hand into his, interlocking your fingers. He didn't squeeze back. Several times you yelled, "Morning!" expecting him to come out of it, but no response.

Since then, Omma has been crying on and off. Family members and friends, too. They've all been visiting. Yesterday you saw Samchon count money from Omma's purse and sign some papers that a hospital worker brought. You couldn't hear what Omma and uncle were talking about but they sat together at the table for

a long time. You pulled on Omma's shirt to come play but she kept talking with Samchon.

Today, after you woke up, Omma got you dressed in special clothes and carried you back into the reception area. Some aunts and uncles arrive with Samchon. There's one Imo who especially loves to hold you by your hands and swing you around in those helicopter circles. You run over and wrap your arms around her with a big squeeze, "Imo!!" Her eyes are watery as she picks you up with a smile, "Hee-Seong-ah!"

A staff member comes out from a room and says something to Omma. Omma picks you up and carries you through a doorway and the first thing you notice is a long wooden box. It's surrounded by flowers and placed above it is a framed picture of Appa, smiling.

"Appa, where are you??" You reach your hand out toward the box, but Omma holds you close.

More people arrive. Some bow slightly toward us. Others take turns bowing on the ground toward Appa, and then toward Omma.

Omma cries and tries to smile.

We go to a large field where hundreds of large stone blocks and dark green shrubs stand up out of the ground. There are flowers next to each one. Cherry blossom petals lay scattered all around us. Walking down one of the rows, you hold Omma's hand and recognize Korean letters carved in each of the stones. As you pass one, you recognize the word for family, "가족."

"Where are we?"

It's almost May but Omma made you wear heavy, itchy clothes. You're trying to undo some of it when our family stops at one of the shrubs. You see the box from the hospital next to a big hole in the ground. Someone talks for a few minutes. Omma doesn't look at you when you check to see what her face looks like. You pull on Omma's hand, but she doesn't respond.

You look to others for a clue. Imo sees, picks you up into her arms and gives you a kiss on the cheek. Some of the people from the group

hug Omma and leave. Samchon puts his hand on Imo's shoulder and makes a motion with his head. Imo carries you over to Omma and says something. You reach out for Omma but she's turned away as Imo carries you back toward Samchon. The three of you begin walking through the rows of stones and shrubs, but you start crying and reaching out for Omma. "Omma! Omma! Appa!"

You reach your hand out again in the shape of Appa's high five, "Appa!!"

Imo holds you a bit tighter and whispers, "괜찮아 . . ." She comforts you, repeating it over and over softly as she walks with Samchon, "Kwaenchanah . . . Kwaenchanah . . . It's okay . . . It's okay . . ."

You never saw the box get lowered into the ground. But you could feel it.

"Dada, where are you? Where are you??"

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