Kaomi Lee:

Welcome to another episode of Adapted Podcast.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

When you are an adoptee and you have experienced loss and separation, I love the thought that you can change the narrative.

Kaomi Lee:

I'm your host, Kaomi Lee. We want to thank once again, our theme music from JayJen, you can go to his Spotify or website jayjenmusic.com. We've made it to the end of another year, and it's fitting that we will meet a special person named Mai from Denmark. She's been sharing her story through music and agreed to come on the podcast to talk about it all, including an aspect that is often overlooked. Now, here's Mai.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

My name is Mai Young Ovilsen. I'm a Korean adoptee living in Copenhagen, and I was adopted to, first Olbo and then Aarhus to my adopted parents in 1983. I'm 39 years old, and I'm also a composer and musician. [foreign language 00:01:09]

Kaomi Lee:

Wow. Mai, I've actually been to Copenhagen, so I was there, or Kobenhavn, Copenhagen, Kobenhavn, this summer, and wow, what a fabulous city?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. I was so happy to see that you found your sister and you were here, and you were also on national television, and I got chills from the whole situation, the whole story.

Kaomi Lee:

Did you watch it?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, I think so, but maybe afterwards. I don't know, maybe it was passed around in the adoptee community on Facebook because people were excited on your behalf. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

That's so sweet. Yeah. I mean, I never actually thought I would go to Denmark, and to know now that I have a connection now to Denmark, so it's crazy, I hope to be back. But I was just impressed with... I think Copenhagen is one of the cities that, for me anyway, I hadn't heard that much about, it's kind of sleeper city, I didn't realize how global it is and I really liked it. So I thought it was... And I love the biking culture.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. Everybody bikes.

Kaomi Lee:

Everybody bikes. I mean, as many people commute by car, that many also... I learned that many also commute by bike, and it's an equal amount. And the bike lanes are so wide and there's all these signals on your bike of when you're going to slow down or stop and-

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. It's almost like the bikes control the city, the cars they have to adjust to the behavior of cyclists. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. So, when did you move to Copenhagen?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I moved here when I began studying at the university, and I also moved... My main reason for moving, I grew up in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, but I wanted to pursue music and find bandmates and have a broader range of opportunities here. And then I came here to study as well, because I thought that was a great opportunity to do both, and then have, sort of, a daily routine here, and a place to meet new people.

Kaomi Lee:

Growing up, did you always kind of know that you were going to end up in Copenhagen?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

No, not necessarily, but looking back, I also understand my need to move to a place where the cultural range was bigger, and where I could go to a lot of concerts and get inspiration, and also be a part of the cultural event festival community, and so on. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

Tell us a little bit about growing up in Aarhus?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. I'm from Aarhus, and I have a little sister, she's called Fi and she's adopted too. And I grew up just five kilometers outside of the city center in a very safe environment. And I have a lot of light memories from my childhood. We grew up close to the school, and lots of friends on the road I was growing up. And I think I didn't have the experience that things could be in another way, but when I listened to stories from other Danish adoptees, I think Aarhus has quite high percentage of Korean adoptees. When you walk around in the city you see people, and there were several at my school, and I even have second cousins who are adopted too, so we were as many Korean adoptees, children in my family as Danish looking children in the family. So, I sort of felt comfortable in my adoptee identity.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And then there's another thing that I can see is different too, and that is that my mother, she was working as a nurse, and she actually went to Korea in the '70s and the '90s to pick up children for adoptive families. So, she was not only familiar with the country, but she was also familiar with the head at KSS in Korea, and she went to dinner with her family, she went to Jeju and Busan and Seoul, and also Tokyo, in the '70s, and she had been able to see the change in the Korean society also over a period of 20 years. So, that's a special thing too. Korea was actually more of my mother's country, that was a country where she had a connection. I was very aware of my looks and my heritage, and I was proud of it, without really knowing much about it. I knew the flag and I knew where to find it on a globes, on the world map. And I was very aware of, my parents told me that when I was very small, when we met new people, I sort of explained that to them and I pointed at my parents, "This is my adoptive parents and I also have biological parents in Korea, and this is what... " I don't know, maybe I had a way of looking at things.

Kaomi Lee:

Would it be almost like your mother was a bit more interested in Korea than you were growing up?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I was interested in, I would say, my Korean identity, but just more on my own behalf, and she was interested in the actual country. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

How did she get involved with Korean adoption or Korea?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, actually, I don't know 100%. It's very special that we have these pictures of Korea in the 1970s and our family photo albums, but I think it was something about her being a nurse, and then I think she had a dream at some time about being [inaudible 00:09:14]. And then I don't know how she got this opportunity, maybe it was through some doctors she was working with, and then she just thought that sounded like quite an adventure. And I also think that's the reason why she ended up adopting us.

Kaomi Lee:

Right. Okay. So, she was volunteering or doing this travel to help bring back Korean children for adoption? She was doing that before they decided to adopt you?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah. Yes.

Kaomi Lee:

And I would imagine the fact that she had traveled in the country and met people and had barbecue with them, that is unusual because unlike many of our parents, she had a reference point, she was introduced to culture that she was adopting from, so I would imagine that had to have... Did that come out in your childhood at all? Did she make Korean food? I don't know, she could talk about the country in a way that, like I know my parents couldn't?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

My parents were very alert, that it was important in some way so we went to gatherings with the Korean Danish Society which was founded by the... We had a hospital ship, a Danish hospital ship, during the Korean War called Jutlandia, and that association was founded by hospital veterans from Jutlandia. So it was quite a normal thing for us to attend the Korean Danish Christmas party and the Korean Danish summer party and meet up with other kids and... Yeah. And I took this kind of thing with me into my adulthood, with the Korean adoptee associations, IKAA and [inaudible 00:11:37] Denmark and the gatherings and all these wonderful... This community feeling.

Kaomi Lee:

The cozy feeling, hygge?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. Yeah, that's right. That's hygge.

Kaomi Lee:

And you can't buy it in a store, right?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

That's right.

Kaomi Lee:

So what I know about Denmark and Scandinavia, it sounds like also, but that don't really talk about race that much.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

That's right.

Kaomi Lee:

Was that the case with your family? Or because there was more awareness... Was your family unusual?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I think the whole talk about ethnicity, it's almost a conversation that we don't have in Denmark even now, so when it's not a conversation, you can't really bring up a subject in that context. So my parents talked about it very much, just me and my sister and what it meant for our family, and it was just about the Korean connection and the Danish connection. But we were told that it was something that was especially a positive or a beautiful thing that we were brought together as a family, and that what luck it was, because the chance of us getting together in that union of [inaudible 00:13:23], the chances of that happening, all these threats, me and my sister from two different families, it was talked about in a very positive way. But also because my mom went to Korea and she talked about seeing girls at our age, or maybe older than us or young women, and talking about them in a way that... "You will be as beautiful as them." or she brought home recording artist with a female artist on the front cover and... They have been very good at talking about it in a very positive manner, filled with love.

Kaomi Lee:

And you said that there were other adoptees, like cousins and other, in your family, so it, I think growing up, felt quite normal.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes.

Kaomi Lee:

And in your school as well?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. But I also had the awareness that we were few, but I didn't have the feeling that I was alone. But I don't know, I translate it somehow to a feeling of being special, as a kid, at least. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

People who have another sibling adopted from Korea as well, oftentimes I've heard stories where the siblings don't really talk about Korea that much, or it wasn't part of the bonding experience necessarily, or one sibling's interested in their identity and the other one isn't, into their Korean identity. What was the case for you and your sister?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, 100% the case. I'm the one who went to the gatherings and became a member of Korea Klubben. And Fi she thinks about it I think, she thinks about it like, "Yeah, I would like to travel to Thailand. I would like to travel to Indonesia. I would like to travel to Korea.", she just thinks of it as an experience, a travel experience, definitely. And my parents always noticed this, that we had such a different way to it.

Kaomi Lee:

How do you identify?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I identify as, I think Western Asian, I think very much about being an Asian looking person in the west. And then I also think a lot about being a Korean adoptee, and that has also translated into my music and the album that we just made with my band. But I think about it also in a whole other broader sense than I did in my childhood, because now I understand the importance of representation and having a voice, and being people in a group that can represent certain experiences or putting a light on things that have been unfair or where human rights have somehow been, I don't know, put in the corner.

Kaomi Lee:

But generally speaking, in Denmark, would you say that the dominant narrative is that it's a beautiful thing and how lucky you were to have been raised in Denmark?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Let me think, that's a really good question, I know that's a common adoption narrative to have, right? I think I have to start from another place. Denmark is very... It's a very free thinking country, so that concept of something being... I think the narrative, or maybe it's just from my perspective, has been much more that it was just up to each family to form their own narrative, because I think there are many different reasons why people adopt, and it's also very different how willing people are to be open about their personal reasons for it, and also because of course there can be pain involved if people have not been able to have their own kids or something in the reprod... Fertility issues or so on. But I think that overall, there are not many people in Denmark who have done it for Christian reasons, it's for personal reasons. And then this was a thing that opened up as a possibility. And I don't think that people reflected that much about it, and then there was sort of a match, there were children who didn't have parents, and there were parents who didn't have children, and then they came together, and this system made it possible.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But of course, that doesn't mean that there hasn't been a learning curve, where I think in the beginning people just thought about the match, whereas now the reflection of having another ethnicity in the country where you grow up and the need to find your roots or your birth family or return to your origin, in all sorts of different aspects, I think the conversation or the understanding of that is broadened. But it's also because of the whole generation of adoptees growing up and forming a voice, forming opinions, starting to share experiences with each other, starting to form unions where they can exchange these things and so on and so forth.

Kaomi Lee:

How do you weave or talk about adoption or touch on adoption or being an adoptee in your music?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I have formed an album with my band, Meejah, and I play with the two musicians, Daniel Nayberg and Andreas Isbrandt Løvenskjold And we have created an album over the eight trigrams in Korean philosophy, and they also have the four trigrams in each corner of the Korean flag. And for me personally, I think it's been this... I said it just before, that you have so few things that can remind you about Korea in a Scandinavian context. That's different now with all the BTS, all the fans, the army, that's all over the world now, it's such amazing and strange things to happen right now these years because we are so not used to it.

Kaomi Lee:

It's kind of suddenly cool to be Korean now.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Exactly. I think a lot about stereotypes, and also when I hear Asian stereotypes in the US, they are different from stereotypes in Denmark or in the European context. And then this has just changed, it's been a game changer, it's just, I don't know, Korean guys are suddenly the hardest thing you can... Wow. It's such a huge game changer in representation, and especially in an American context, people have been... The conversation is there in an American good context about D masculinity... What's that called? D mascul-

Kaomi Lee:

Emasculization or?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, exactly. And all these kind of stereotypes and narratives that we tell about each other, if they produce a feeling of low self-esteem, then they need more attention, more to be lifted up, in a more conscious way to talk about them. But this BTS thing that has just with a single snap changed the whole that... Oh my God. And then I'm so happy to see this whole rise in also American popular culture with Sandra Oh and Ali Wong and Awkwafina and Ronny Chieng, the list goes on now. And it's a whole new thing, just the last two, three years.

Kaomi Lee:

If you touch on adoption or your identity in your music, is it more explicit or is it more abstract?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I think it's very emotional. We have built the album over the eight elements, and it's thunder and wind and mountain and fire and so on, it's nature elements, but each of these elements also stand for directions, north, south, east, west, and also mother, father, sister, brother, and spring, summer, fall, and winter, and then spring again. So, in the philosophy, there's this cycle thinking which derives from Eastern philosophy. And it was a way to sort of present another way of thinking than the Western discourse. And I think of cultures as these entities that have produced wisdom, and if you can combine the wisdoms from different cultures, it will make each culture stronger because if we can unite forces then it's better. And this cycle of the eight trigrams stands for the unity of all opposites.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And I like that way of thinking, that things are not expected to be... The things that bind the elements together is a cycle of change. And when you are an adoptee and you have experienced loss and separation, I love the thought that you can change the narrative through going through different elements in a symbolic way, and also use your starting point of separation, and maybe also your starting point of sorrow as a way of enhancing your empathy and that's a point in your identity or your history, your personality, that makes you able to connect with other people who have experienced the same.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And then we try to translate each song into the energy of each element like Koreans do in the TaeKwonDo. So they also perform a whole series of the mountain energy, or the energy of the fire, or the energy of heaven. So it's a way for me to reconnect with my Korean roots, but it's also a way of interpreting them in my way of thinking about the world.

Kaomi Lee:

The idea of loss and grief, when did you first start to think about that?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I know when it manifested, and that was when I wrote my first song, when I became a songwriter. And I could feel that there was sort of an inner pressure that couldn't find another... It couldn't find a way out of my system, but it could find a way out through tones, notes, sounds, sounds with my voice and lyrics and so on. And that's also why I talked about my childhood environment, that was very safe and loving and so on. But when you grow up and you start to develop yourself as an individual, which every human person has to do, suddenly there were deeper emotion that emerged there. And I also had to find a way through this kind of soul searching, which took several years, maybe a decade, before it actually manifested, and me thinking that it could have a connection to my Korean heritage and my Korean identity.

Kaomi Lee:

About how old did it start for you?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I think I was 16, 17 years old, but I was 25 before I took contact to Korea Klubben for the first time. And I had many doubts, and what that meant for me and could mean, or if I should do it, or... I don't know, I had many sort of existential conversations with myself. But when I picked up the phone for the first time and just contacted Korea Klubben, it just felt right.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. The narrative that was presented to adoptive parents or prospective parents, they were also meeting with other parents at the time, they were adopted, who also had small children, and adoption agencies it's this very kind of like loving picture, it's parents and it's small kids and everyone's happy. I think there wasn't a realization so much that, like you said, this inner pressure was building, or there's, kind of, something happening as you move towards adulthood, and I think that that's one of the things that I hope that adoptive families are more aware of now, or people who are about to adopt they're more aware that you can have a happy childhood as children, but that "I feel like... " No, it's not all adoptees, of course, but there can... I think a common theme is, if one has grown up feeling very disconnected from their origins or culture or whatever, what have you, and they grow up feeling very white and that they can have problems later in life.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes.

Kaomi Lee:

So, one of my hopes is also that just these stories create more awareness of there's this lifespan, and the way you might feel as an adoptee as a 10 year old can shift over time, and as you are living out your own life, and the things that you need and are interested in. And I love the fact that you're connecting with music and your band, and you have an outlet for this. Do you feel like that pressure has somewhat... Would you say it's kind of a pain as well? Is it something that has... The music has helped you?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. I think much about the transformation of pain. And that's why I think I felt connected to this cycle philosophy thinking, because that's exactly what it is, it is a transformation of pain, and then you rise your consciousness to a higher level, but then the cycle will begin again to move yourself even further, or in different direction. I discovered at some point that this hand feeling, the Korean hand pain, which I interpreted it as deriving from being a smaller country between two huge countries, sort of like Poland and Europe, that was just between Russia and Germany, and Korea between Japan and China. It's like the pain of the people of Korea. But it's also sort of a pride that it won't break, you feel the kind of pain but you won't let it break you, you hold your head up high and you live with it and you live through it. And that's my interpretation and beautiful things can come out of it.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And then I recently learned from, I think it's an adoptee from Belgium, he said, "Adoptee, it's great that you know the concept of Han, but you should also know the concept of [inaudible 00:32:23] that is an unspecific feeling of love for the connection of things, connection between people, connection and communities. I just love that there's a culture where you have an expression just in one word for these kinds of feelings, and every time I find something on a deeper level, that's Korean, that's historically, culturally or philosophically Korean, I feel very connected to it.

Kaomi Lee:

Do you feel there's a special bond between adoptees?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes, definitely. But that's from an experienced... That's because when... It almost feels like family when people meet, and that feeling can come even though people haven't spoken with each other. It's a strange, and it's a very beautiful thing. And I think that's the first thing I realized from going to the gathering in Korea with 500 Korean adoptees from different Western countries. Maybe I was trying to figure out my relation to the Korean community or the way of thinking or living, but what I found was that the Koreanivity was sort of my true identity point because even though we are different, we have different nationalities and so on, we have this common thing about... I also think it's a knowledge about what it means to combine two different cultures in your life, in your world, in your way of seeing things. And if I'm talking from a very idealistic point, I also think that we are a resource that could enrich Korea at some point in return, because it is a unique way of seeing the world when you have this transnational way of thinking, looking at things.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And that's another thing, I also like to connect with other people who has this transnational gaze. Can you have a transnational gaze? I think so. And that's very much what the album is about, because you can find some... I've also spent much time on a small country called the Faroe Islands, and I am very connected to Northern roots as well. The languages, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese, Icelandic they come from the same language root, which is called Old Norse and, I don't know, it's something about these historical lines and deep engrave things that sort of made us who we are. I like when you go down to these roots, and it can be my Korean roots, but it can also be the Nordic thing, and it could also be other places in the world. I like to make music and art and conversation blah, blah, blah, so forth from that place. I enjoy being in that space.

Kaomi Lee:

So you feel a connection to the Nordic culture as well?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. Ultimately, it's about the feeling of home, where do you feel at home?

Kaomi Lee:

What year did you go to... Oh, before we go to the gathering in Korea, I wanted to ask you more specifically about your band. What do you play and are you the main songwriter?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I'm the main songwriter, and I'm a singer and I also play piano and guitars. But, when I come with my songs or my compositions with my bandmates, they sort of come with their understanding of sound and music to genres and composition and so on, and then we take these elements together and that's really what makes the music whole, because then they widen and broaden the sound and the potential of the song.

Kaomi Lee:

So, it's a collaboration, not a dictatorship?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

It's not a dictatorship, but it is my stories. But I don't think it's that unusual that there's a band leader in a band, but I couldn't do this, it wouldn't be the same record, it wouldn't be the same music without them. So, we need each other to be at our best. What I really love about it is that you can share everything with each other, when it goes well, when there's a bump in the road, and just being able to share things that excite you.

Kaomi Lee:

Tell us about your bandmates, who's in your band and how did you find them?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

This is a Danish concept, it's called high school, and it's the same word if you translate it directly to high school in English, but it's not that high school... We met at a high school, and high school is something that a lot of, especially, young people in Denmark go to after their high school and before university, we don't have college, we only have university. And it's a place where people usually get to do a lot of their hobbies, or maybe do some of their hobbies that they hope to professionalize in. But originally it was founded from a democratic roots, where people from all over the country moved to the same school in the countryside, maybe 70 or 100 people together, and lived there for a half a year together. So people would hear different opinions from people from all over the country and have a discussion in open and warm environment. So, there's sort of educational people, educational perspective to it. It's very difficult to explain because I think it is a solely Danish concept, but we were all connected to this high school called the Rhythmic High School in Denmark. It means a high school where people play music.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And at some point, this cycle of music and these compositions around the trigrams came up for me and I started writing them. And then I needed to find somebody to play with at a festival where I was booked, and then I asked first Andreas, the guitar player, if he wanted to play along. And then three months later, the second gig where we had the opportunity to do the opening act for the Korean band [inaudible 00:41:11] that combines a traditional Korean folk music with post metal, sort of, alternative rock from the west. And just like us, it was sort of the same concept, we are just going from the west to the east and they were going from the east to the west. So we were very lucky to play with them. And then Daniel, the second guy, went to the concert and he said, "Maybe I should help you with some of the sound things. It could be more open, it could be wider." And then we started working together and then we formed the band constellation.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. So it's three in the band?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

And how does it feel... You said that you have performed live?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

How does it feel to perform these songs that are very personal and meaning to people who may have no idea that you're singing about adoption or your story?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah. I try to tell something about the song, and this cycle and the Korean philosophy in between numbers, so they feel the cycle of change inside of themselves because you can hear just that the different songs have different energies. So, I try to explain it in a way that they have a reference point for the different songs and how they should feel them in their body. And then there are several Asian artist here in Denmark, but I think I'm one of the only ones that try to interpret transnational identity and Korean identity. So, I know that this is a new story and I feel that it's important to be heard. So, that's also a part of the purpose, just being in this band and telling these stories.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I thought much about us being mixed I'm Korean ethnicity, and the two other band members being Danish. Just the picture of us, sort of, tells the story of allyship or that you can form meaningful everything across ethnicity, that's not really the point of our being. But it can also contribute with different views that can reinforce or enrich people that really have these conversations with each other. I don't know, it's important for me that this, sort of, message of peace or that I do think representation is important because you have to have people that you can mirror yourself in and look up to and understand yourself from outside and in and inside and out. But it's also important that that's not necessarily the only thing that defines us.

Kaomi Lee:

So, tell us, when was the first time you went back to Korea?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

It was in 2007 for the IKA gathering. And then I also went on a Buddhist temple tour and the summer school trip, it was three weeks. So, it was very intense being there for the first time and doing all these different things. And it was very intense because we were, I think, 25 people or some something around that, in a bus for a week, traveling around different places and then being, sort of, in a college environment all over again, and then one week in Seoul. But it really changed everything, being able to experience all these different, also just, all these new impressions. Taking it all in and also very different impressions.

Kaomi Lee:

I always like to ask adoptees about their first time back, sort of, if you can remember how you were feeling at the time on the plane ride and landing and at the airport?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I think I was nervous, and also excited and confused, and I also had many thoughts about just when you are raised in a Scandinavian society, you don't see many different ethnicities. So just the feeling of being in a place with mostly Asian people that really twisted something in my mind, and I remember we had a flight shift in Frankfurt and that's when we walked towards the Korean Airlines planes, and already there, people started to be more and more just Koreans there, so I remember being in Frankfurt in the terminal, I don't know, waiting for the plane and just the change of ethnicity, and just thinking, "Okay, I'm all right with it. I'm all right with it." And then that, sort of, prepared me for landing in Incheon.

Kaomi Lee:

And in a way, they are all coming together, to go back to your homeland together.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah. And then it felt like, "Okay, I can do this. This feels right. This actually feels... " But there are just so many news, everything is new, every experience, every impression is new and different than what you were used to, so you don't know how you will respond or react to it before you are there. But I remember one of the first things I noticed was the animals living in Korea, just the cranes and the color of the earth, just the actual earth, and of course buildings and nature, just seeing the fields and, sort of, the small rocks, it's not the rocks, not just the mountains but when you look over fields and highways and there's... Yeah. And the smell and the feeling of the air. And also the coins, the money.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And what was really important for me, there were so many social impressions, but what was really important for me was also just the fact that now I knew, when I returned, now I know what it smells like, what it looks like, what it feels like, what kind of birds are flying outside the window, and the smell of the air. That surprised me, that was such an important thing for me to know. I think it's because when you get associated with a place your whole life, your whole childhood, because it's of course obvious with our looks, so it's a thing people ask you about, actually knowing that was so important. I really liked the mountains and the rivers. And I liked walking on these wooden, sort of, stairs or pathways, crossing the rivers in folk villages and so on. I liked those kind of areas where... But that's also what translated itself several years after into the album, those kind of elements. Now, I also know why these elements are a part of Korean philosophy, it's because that's actually what you look at outside the window.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But I like being in Seoul because I like cities. So I was very surprised how both overwhelming and cool and how much I liked the vibe in soul, and I liked the vibe of the people. It's not just that we look alike and "Hey, they look like me.", it's also just the vibe, it's a very soft vibe, people's vibe are very soft in Korea. And then all of a sudden I could feel when I return to Copenhagen that the vibe here is very much different. So, that was the thing I missed when I returned. And now when I think about it, I also think there's some truth to that I use some of my energy scanning my surroundings in a place where I'm not the majority, but I wasn't aware of that at that time, but I am now.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But there was one thing, and I think I was afraid of going to the orphanage, KSS. And I think I was afraid because the pain, that was the thing that had sort of turned up in my life and I needed to do something about it, that's why I ended up in Korea for the first time. So, I didn't know how I would feel when I got out there, if it would be intense and hard, and... I don't know, but the moment I stepped into the property, I felt at home there, I liked being there, it felt like, I don't know, some place that I went with my kindergarten. It felt like something deep, from some place back in my brain, like a place I visited before. And that took away some of my, I think the right word is fear. It took away some of my fear. I could actually relate to this place, I liked being there.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. It makes sense. I mean, your first few months in life were there, you probably recognized somewhere deep inside, you recognize the smells, the sounds, maybe just being in that place it felt... Like you said, it's like it felt sentimental, in a way, or going back... Not sentimental, maybe nostalgic.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

It was more that I had built up this story about, maybe, it would be a [crosstalk 00:52:59] Yeah, or really emotionally tough experience, but then it was... I could sort of breathe when I came out there. So, the right thing to say is just, it took away some of the fear.

Kaomi Lee:

It's almost like you could kind of prove to yourself. I mean, this is... What's so intense for adoptees to go back is facing our own fears about the trip, being relinquished, being given up, rejection, abandonment, all of those things are not easy. But the fact that you could face your fear and survive.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. Yeah. That's a nice way to put it. Yes. Thank you.

Kaomi Lee:

The facing your fear, it didn't break you, that you could come out. And I think as adoptees, we can get some strength from that.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yes. That also contributed to that feeling of deep knowing, like I said, with the soil and the plants and the animals, it was sort of a deep knowing. I also think it was the feeling that it was okay, it was okay that I once was here, it wasn't, I don't know, a monster in the closet. It was okay.

Kaomi Lee:

Would you like to share about your adoption or your origin story? Do you know what was in your file? Is that okay to talk about?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

It was actually my mother, when she went to KSS in the beginning of the '90s, she kept on asking if there were any names or birth dates or any other information, and I think she was there three years in a row, and the first time she got a no, and the next time she got a no, and then suddenly there were names of my birth parents, and also birth dates. And so she came back to Denmark with a small paper note where the names had been written on. And I don't know, maybe I've been nine years old or 10 years old, and I think it was very cool of my mom to do this on my behalf. And I know that my parents just... They wanted me to have the opportunity if I wanted it, and that's also why she, sort of, kept a relationship to the head of KSS. We send each other Christmas cards and they actually even visited us one time in Aarhus when I was a small kid, she and her husband came to Denmark and we have pictures of them and us in our garden in Aarhus.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

So, when I went to KSS myself for the first time in 2007, she sort of came... We had to take a photography, all of us visiting there, and then she came up to me and she held my arm and whispered in my ear, "I know who you are.", in a very kind way, and I said, "Yes, thank you. Huge greetings for my parents." And then once again, I don't know if you've been in this kind of situation but I think many other adoptees, have you sit down with the social worker at the table and your file is there, and you can see them sort of having a conversation in their head, how much information they want to give you and you have to be patient, and then they didn't even give out all the information that my mother had gotten several years before so I just sat there and tested them, what they were willing to say and not say.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But then in 2007, I was asked the question, "So, do you want to search?" I didn't know what I was going to answer them, before I went to Korea. But in 2007 when I was asked the question, I actually heard my mouth go, "No, not yet.", and just hear that answer come out of my own voice, mouth, that was really because I had so many thoughts about it before going there, that was really nice just to hear, sort of, a clear answer coming out of my own throat. Then I went back in 2013 to another gathering, and months ahead I decided that I wanted to try to see if they could find some information.

Kaomi Lee:

And at that time, what did they withhold from you? Because you already had the names, right? Did they-

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, they said the ages of my parents, but they didn't say the birth dates, but I had the birth dates. So, what I could see them doing was they were calculating how many years from 1957 to... They were doing this calculation in their head. That's the strength of talking to so many other Korean adoptees and being in the community that people actually prepared you that you could end up in a situation like this, so that could happen.

Kaomi Lee:

And did they tell you the names?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

They told me the names, yes. Then I tried to search in 2013, and this is really a tough spot for me, but they tried to contact my mother, or at least that's the story I was told, and they got her on the phone and she denied that she had given up a child, and that just felt... I don't know, so close to the goal and not being able to actually make the connection. Well, she didn't say directly that she didn't want to meet me, and I understand that there can be so many reasons, emotional, traumatic, and her being in a new family, I don't know whatever reason and I respect that she's a human being and she has her own motives for what she does. She didn't reject meeting me but she denied that she ever was in a situation like that. And then I just was told that maybe she needed more time and I could try to reach out to her, I don't know, some years later maybe she had to get used to the thought, and she always of course had the opportunity to reach out to the adoption agency and say that now she was ready and then they would contact me.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But then this strange thing happened, at least to me it was very strange. I think it was in 2000 and... Maybe it's just a year ago. I don't remember, maybe it was just in 2020. I tried once again and then they said that they lost her address. So all of a sudden she moved further away and I really wasn't prepared for that. And the years between 2007 when I heard myself say, "No, not yet, I'm not ready yet." and then until 2013, I hadn't many doubts and many feelings and thoughts and conversations with myself if I was ready for doing this, and it's also because you want to prevent yourself from being rejected. But I came to a conclusion at some point that it was more important me to be honest about my own need and desire and hope for making this happen in my life than the fear of being rejected for it, because it would've been a win already that I just stopped denying that was a thing that I actually wanted.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

But later on I also found out that this piece of paper that my mother brought home in the '90s that I've been staring at, and I found out that my father's information, his name and his birthdate was false. And then all of a sudden, I discovered how much I had put into this name and this birth date on this piece of paper that I had had for so many years, and that blew my mind in a different way. It tells so much about our basic need of knowing where we come from and who we are and who we came from. And the birth date I got on him was that his birthday was also in November, like myself, 10 days after my own. So each year I have thought about him on that date and I had been proud that we were scorpions, so the [inaudible 01:03:34].

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And all of a sudden, this was just a story that I had had with myself. And, I don't know, it's also... Of course it has a devastating element, but it also really taught me this need for telling these stories about ourselves, and even I had told it about something that wasn't even true, like a phantom or something like that, and how much we cling to even the tiniest of information, and also the understanding that there are so many basic human rights that are sort of trapped in this system of international adoption that was made so many years ago. And I understood that the personal pain, of course, there's the separation from my birth family and from Korea, me being moved to another country, but there's also the way that it was dealt with, and that some of these emotion that I'm feeling that I thought was my own, they are actually made of some of these structures. And that realization was very important.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I think it was very important for my sense of integrity, knowing that, "Hey, this is not just my struggle or some sort of a vulnerable part of myself, this is actually because there are rights here, that every human being should have, that have been violated. And, I don't know, knowing that gave me such a powerful sense of self that I also think that contributed to that was ready to give out this album with my band. So, that's also when we are playing concerts and I'm telling about some of these things from the stage, I feel very grounded in the importance of this matter.

Kaomi Lee:

Which is like facing a fear of going to your orphanage. You are still standing today, even though the stories that you thought were your story got ripped away.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

So there's that kind of unbreakable spirit.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah. Yes. Thank you.

Kaomi Lee:

Well, we were talking about this earlier, that the frustration and the sadness of, I think the process of searching, is not always talked about so much, that either are able to search or not, and you're able to reunite or not, but in your case, being so close... Well, first of all, not being ready, and then when you are ready then being denied even the acknowledgement of that from your mother. What would you like people to know about that process?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I would like for them to know that it's not a fairy tale like several TV programs represented. I understand the basic fascination of these kind of stories, that's also why they're so popular, but that's really not how it feels from the inside, it's a long ongoing process. And I also hear from other entities that have been able to reunite that building a relationship if you find each other, that's just a very starting point of it. From my personal point of view, also because it's not a interrelational process, it hasn't been for me. It has been important for me just to recognize myself every time I was ready for something new, just putting action behind my own intention. And that's been the important part of it, like you said before, not being afraid, just standing by my own wish.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

And then I couldn't do more. That's actually also been sort of a freeing point, because I came out strong about my own wish, I was more prepared to accept hers, my birth mother, because I experienced, it's like to be the master of my own life than I was more ready to accept that, of course, she is the master of her own life too. And I don't want to judge because I don't know the details, I don't know what it's like to be her, but I know what it's like to be me. And that's the thing I have power.

Kaomi Lee:

If people want to reach out to you, or learn more about your music, how can they do that?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

I would recommend people to listen to the album on Spotify and try to feel the cycle of change while they're listening to each track. It is made out of all these emotions and recognitions that we talked about today, and it's been a wonderful experience to transfer, made into musical structures. And we have our Instagram profile media, M-E-E-J-A-H and also on Facebook. And if you have any personal questions to me, you can also find me on my private profile called maiyoungovilsen.

Kaomi Lee:

And the name of your band is Meejah?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Meejah, yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

So, on Spotify they would look up M-E-E-J-A-H?

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah. Yes.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. Very good. Well, thanks again, Mai. That was lovely to meet you today.

Mai Young Øvilsen:

Yeah, you too Kaomi. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Kaomi Lee:

Tak Mai, thank you also for making the music that you do. Well, 2021, it's been a tough and challenging year, I want to take a moment and thank everyone who has downloaded, listened, and shared this podcast with others. I also want to thank my Patreon and Kickstarter supporters who have helped enhance the podcast and make it more accessible. And lastly, I hope these stories bring you some comfort and community in our uncertain world. See you next time.