Tara Tenhoff:

My name is Tara Tenhoff. I live in the Northern suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. I am 47. The Korean name that I was adopted under is Kim Mi-sun, but I have found out actually that the name that I was born with was Kim Hyung-sook.

Kaomi Lee:

So Tara, I wanted to ask you, I know a little bit about your story. You had a very, I don't want to say rare, but your adoption story is a bit different because you weren't adopted through an agency. Can you tell us what you know?

Tara Tenhoff:

Yeah. It is a little bit different. It was a private adoption that was facilitated through what my American family has called a broker. And similar to what my Korean family has referred to, the gentleman's name was Mr. O as well. My American aunt, my dad's sister was in the army in Korea in the '70s. And she would go off-base to an army bar and there was a man there who could always get things. And so jokingly, one night she had said, "Hey, my brother and his wife would like to adopt a child. Can you help me find a baby?" She's young. She's 22 years old and she was really just joking. But she said a few weeks later that Mr. O showed up at the bar and said, "Come with me." And he led her down these streets and these back alleyways and knocked on the store and a man came out and they had a conversation.

Tara Tenhoff:

And essentially Mr. O turned to my aunt and said, "If you want this baby, you have to take her today." And my aunt said, "I'm sorry. I don't understand." And he said, "The family says that they will give you the baby, but you have to take her right now and this is it." And my aunt, wanting to do what she could for my dad said okay. And she said that they brought me out and I had a shirt and a diaper and a bottle. And they essentially handed me over to her. And he said, "I'll be in contact with you on how to fill out forms and get papers and now this baby is for you."

Tara Tenhoff:

And so she had taken me then back to the army barracks where she was staying and tried to figure out, "Now, what do I do? I have this baby that was just handed over to me." And I did ask her, I said, "Did you give them money?" And she said, "I don't recall." She said, "I may have handed over what little bit of cash I had in my pocket." She said that it was very obvious that there was many family members living in what she described as a compound, many family members, there was multiple kids. And so that was kind of how my relinquishment came about.

Kaomi Lee:

And you were adopted by a childless couple?

Tara Tenhoff:

Correct. My mom had had several miscarriages and had been able to sustain a full term pregnancy and they wanted to adopt a baby. And the thing to do in Minnesota in the mid '70s was adopt a child from Korea. And so that's what they did.

Kaomi Lee:

I have to say, Tara, this is the first time I've heard a story like yours, but I'm sure there was other adoptions that were kind of private adoptions or done outside the usual process. Do you know what visa you had come on? Did you come on a tourist visa?

Tara Tenhoff:

That's a great question. I don't know. I'd have to do some digging to see what the actual visa was that I traveled on. It was all legalized. I did have a Korean passport and that there was some type of agency here in Minnesota that helped with the legal proceedings for the adoption, which I think was primarily just done through the county. So I don't know the specifics of all of those details, but I do recall seeing years ago, when first really went through my paperwork, that there was some notation about a visa.

Kaomi Lee:

So to your understanding, was your adoption legal or do you think it was not legal in terms of the Korean government?

Tara Tenhoff:

I believe that it was legal on the Korean side. My American aunt told me how there were times where Mr. O would contact her and say, you need to go to this office on this day and bring this much funds with you. So in order to facilitate getting some of this paperwork finalized, it sounds like there probably was some bribery that went on. But I do know because I came to the United States with my Korean registry, that I was moved from being in my family's Korean registry to then showing that I was now going to this American family.

Tara Tenhoff:

So I will say that from what I've been able to determine by looking at my paperwork, that it definitely was legalized on the Korean side, as well as the American side. And I'll also say that because I was naturalized eventually. And when I went back to Korea to search, they were still able to locate me in the Korean system, which was also a little bit strange after so many years to think that as a person, I still existed in that Korean system. I don't really know what I thought, but that was a little jolting, I think, at that time.

Kaomi Lee:

So it probably seems as if your birth parents had relinquished you legally. They must have signed a paper, something facilitated by this, Mr. O.

Tara Tenhoff:

Yes. Yes. So what I did eventually find out was, there is a document that is signed by my birth mother, but what I had learned after reuniting with my birth family was that it was actually forged by one of my birth father's brothers. So by one of my Korean uncles. So he had forged that, of her relinquishing her right as a parent. And that was something that had I not actually brought out that piece of paper to ask, I don't think I would've ever known. I would've just broadly assumed that I was being told one story as opposed to actually asking some different questions.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. So if that signature to relinquish you was forged, I don't know, would that be considered legal?

Tara Tenhoff:

So that's a good question, because I wondered that myself, what does that mean in terms of the legality of that relinquishment? Because my birth mom was in Busan and not in Seoul which is where I was relinquished and where I was essentially sent from was from Seoul or I guess we departed from Incheon, but I don't know. I mean, I think that goes in line with a lot of the stories that you hear from other adoptees and that their paperwork was forged. My birth father had died and birth mother was not there. It was my birth father's family who was ultimately making this decision that there's too many mouths to feed, these babies are being adopted, this one has the opportunity for a different life.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. And maybe it was illegal in that these parental signatures were forged, but perhaps it was a common practice because we hear so many stories where a grandmother, an aunt, an uncle takes a child to an adoption agency. Who's signing that over, it's not a parent.

Tara Tenhoff:

It's great. And there was, I'm remembering now, there's actually another statement from my uncle who says that my father had died and that my birth mother was unable to be located all the time. So I think using that to maybe somewhat corroborate my birth mother's supposed relinquishment of her parental rights at the same time. I think I grew up in the suburbs north of Minneapolis. So the North Metro Area. I pretty much lived there most of my adult life. I did go to college in Wisconsin, but I have pretty, pretty much been in this Twin Cities, Metro Area the whole time. Very, very, very white in that '70s, '80s timeframe. And while the diversity has grown, I don't know that it's still inclusive in any way.

Kaomi Lee:

What Did you think of the story? Because obviously you grew up knowing the story about how you were given up and how your aunt had basically acquired you in this way. What were your thoughts growing up about it? Or did you think much about it?

Tara Tenhoff:

I think it was more spun as, you were the youngest of five children and there was too many months to feed and you just would've lived in so impoverished in this level of poverty and you might not have even survived and you should be so grateful that we were able to bring you here and give you this life. And if you would've stayed in Korea, your life would've just been terrible and sad was, I think some of what that narrative was. And I had very little to go on until I was an adult. And so that was the story that I just believed that that's what it was, is they were just too poor to feed me because my birth father had died and there was five children was the story. And without having more to go on and without even knowing that there were resources available to adoptees, that was the only narrative I had until I was almost 40 years old.

Kaomi Lee:

What do you think of it now, being in your 40s thinking about that story?

Tara Tenhoff:

It's sad on the one hand because this seems to be a common theme amongst so many adoptee stories is that these families were living at a poverty level and could barely support themselves. I think now as I look back and consider all of the things that I missed out and the person I could have become had I had opportunity to stay in Korea and live with the family that I was born into. And they all live pretty reasonable, decent lives. I don't see any of them living at the poverty level or having issues with health or mental health or any of these things. I think that as with many families, they found ways in order to continue to live sustainable lives. And I think that more than likely I would've turned out just fine had I been able to stay with the family that I was born into, whether I had stayed more under my birth father's family's guidance or had I stayed with my birth mother. I think I would've been just fine.

Kaomi Lee:

And over the years, did your mother ever cross your mind or on your birthday?

Tara Tenhoff:

A lot growing up. A lot of, why wasn't I wanted? Why couldn't they have made it work? It was also very much imparted on me that how patriarchal Korea is. And so without a birth father, I wouldn't have had a good life at all. And there was always those thoughts of why. And I don't know that I ever thought were they looking for me, but just why and why should I want to look for them if they didn't want me?

Kaomi Lee:

Do you ever think now back, and this is a very personal question and again, you don't have to answer if you don't feel comfortable, but do you think that being adopted has impacted your relationships? Have you struggled with relationships?

Tara Tenhoff:

Definitely. It definitely has. It's affected my self confidence as a person. My mom and dad divorced when I was young and they both remarried and I've had my fair share of relationships throughout my early adulthood. And then later into adulthood, I've been married now for almost 18 years, but it has definitely affected my self worth, especially with not being in communication with my dad any longer, with my adopted dad, that has been for many, many years.

Tara Tenhoff:

I have just struggled with how to make those lasting relationships, even in friendships with people throughout the years. I find that I trust far too easily or am either far too skeptical in whether or not I can trust someone. So I feel like I vacillate from one side to the other because I don't know, because it's just that need and desire of feeling accepted and wanted.

Kaomi Lee:

Did you have a close relationship with this aunt that was your basically, I guess second caregiver?

Tara Tenhoff:

Yeah. You could almost characterize her as kind of that foster mother in Korea because I did live with her and her partner in Korea for somewhere between six and eight months after being relinquished. And there's no doubt that bonding was just really imparted in me in those very early stages of my life. And I was in contact with them up until probably my, I don't even think I was a teenager yet. And then my parents divorced when I was eight. I had a very strained relationship with my dad. And then at one point I had no contact with anyone from my dad side of the family. From about the age of probably 11 or 12, up until 22, when I tried to reestablish some contact, that still did not go well and then I had to cut off all contact with all of those family members. That was my decision at that point, not theirs. Prior to that, it had been all my dad's side of the family who had cut off that contact.

Tara Tenhoff:

And then at 28, I tried to reestablish some connection with my aunt and her partner again. And even still, that was really tough. It was the birth of my first child that, I think opened that door. After I had my first child, they made this scrapbook for me that was for me as a baby and it had photos in it that I'd never seen of myself before. And even had a couple of documents that my American aunt had had the whole time. And so that was kind of where I had reestablished that relationship with her and her partner. And that's gone very strong now for the last 17 years, but it took a long time to get there. There was a lot of rebuilding of trust just because I had been very hurt by my dad's family for many years prior to that.

Kaomi Lee:

So Tara, from what age to what age were you with your aunt and her partner?

Tara Tenhoff:

So guesstimated birth of relinquishment was probably somewhere between six and eight months because I was very tiny as an infant. And when I came to the United States, they guesstimated, I must have been around eighteen months. I was walking at that point. When I came to the US, I only knew a few words and they were all English words. When my aunt and her partner would have to go off to their day jobs, I did have an ajumma who would come to sit with me during the day. So it was like a babysitter and I guess she would still try and teach me Korean and only fed me more traditional Korean food. Apparently, I guess I loved Kimchi even as a baby. I always thought that was a funny tidbit that I loved kimchi, even as a baby.

Kaomi Lee:

That's what your aunt told you?

Tara Tenhoff:

Yes. The ajumma because they would say, "Ajumma, don't feed her kimchi." Because there's just that fragrance that kimchi holds and the ajumma would always say, "Oh, but she likes it. She likes it." So my American aunt was the one who flew me from Korea to Minnesota. And she said that even just at the airport, that my mom just kind of swooped in and grabbed me and just kind of took that possessive nature of, this is my child now, this is my baby.

Tara Tenhoff:

And she shared with me that that's when the gravity of the situation really hit that this wasn't her journey any longer and that now she had to relinquish me to her brother and his wife because that's what she had committed to. And my mom told me that the first couple weeks that I cried a lot, I didn't sleep well, that there were definitely adjustment struggles for me in those first few weeks. They had no contact with my American aunt so that I could have that adjustment period. So it was several months before I was even allowed to see her again so that I could adjust to life with just my mom and dad.

Kaomi Lee:

Had your aunt wanted to keep you? Or maybe she regretted turning you over?

Tara Tenhoff:

I think there was a lot of regret. And one thing that she had said to me was, I was just a young person. Like I said, I think she was maybe 21, 22 years old. And my brother or her brother, my dad, was the first born and the oldest and so everybody just wanted to make their big brother happy. And so that was what she had committed to. And my mom and dad on the American side had to jump through a number of their own hoops in order to make the adoption legal here on the US side. So she didn't feel that she could say, "Wait, I think this is a bad decision and I want to keep this child."

Tara Tenhoff:

And I think as her and her partner continued to go through their lives, they questioned did we make the right decision because they've been together for 45 years now. They met shortly after I was relinquished to my aunt. So it's something I think they've always thought about how different could our lives have been kept her and what would that have meant for us as a family had they been able to keep me?

Kaomi Lee:

Now a lot of this upheaval and changes and your caregivers changing, it seems like you went through a lot at a very early age and most of it was out of your control as well as your parents splitting up. Is it something that you then... Did you just crave stability or do you think that you ended up kind of seeking the familiar like a lot of upheaval in your life?

Tara Tenhoff:

It definitely craved familiarity. As a young child, we moved every couple years, which always meant starting new schools. And I know that every time my mom moved that her intention was to move us into something better, but it also meant changing schools for me. And so it just felt like we were on this constant cycle of always moving and always changing and it was always different. And I didn't know what it was like to just be in one place.

Kaomi Lee:

And your husband is White?

Tara Tenhoff:

My husband is White. He's actually a domestic adoptee. And so that brings a different level to the relationship in terms of understanding sometimes. Obviously he can't understand what it's like to be a transracial adoptee, but he can understand some of those fears and emotions and complications that just come with being adopted and having your parents that have raised you and have cared for you and taken care of you, but then also having your biological family there on the kind of the outskirts of your life as well.

Kaomi Lee:

So you two are really your chosen family?

Tara Tenhoff:

We are. That's a very good way of putting it. We really are.

Kaomi Lee:

And I could imagine he probably gets it when you struggle with trust and needing familiarity?

Tara Tenhoff:

He does and he doesn't. He's probably not as introspective as I am emotionally and I think that comes from his own adoption trauma issues. That's purely my speculation. That's from what I can see as I have learned to navigate these waters of where some of my own adoption issues come from, but it does help him to understand some of that.

Kaomi Lee:

I wonder with a domestic adoptee husband, did you find that there was this incredible connection because of the adoption part in the beginning? And have you also found at times that it can be trying because you're both adopted?

Tara Tenhoff:

I think it can be trying for sure, because of how we process some of those things differently. And just that he can't always understand where my own racial insecurities or struggles with racism come from. He just can't. He doesn't have that ability. And on the other hand, it's great because when I first reunited and talking about the level of confusion and excitement and exhilaration and yet hurt, those things he could understand. He could understand what that was on a deeper level than a person who honestly has never been adopted because that's the family that they know. They know that to be their truth, right? And those things he could understand. He's had the opportunity to have some relationships with his biological mother's family, but not with his biological father's family. And so understanding what that part of rejection is like and abandonment, is something that he's able to tap into a little bit differently.

Kaomi Lee:

When did you want to go back to Korea or to search for your family? And was he part of your support or was he supportive of it?

Tara Tenhoff:

He was very supportive. He has always encouraged me to try and search and I was really the one who was far more reluctant to do so. And I started to think about it more after the birth of my first child in 2004. That was the first time I really started to think about it, but I didn't have the capacity emotionally to take on something like that. And then I had my second child in 2007 and I still just did not have the capacity to think about any of that stuff. And when the Olympics were going to be happening in Pyeongchang in 2018, we were talking about, "Hey what would it be like if we could go to Korea to the Olympics, right? How great would that be?" And so we started thinking about that like, "What would that be like? Just to go to a Winter Olympics and let's go to the Winter Olympics and the country you were born in and this is awesome."

Tara Tenhoff:

And so we started thinking about that and what really struck me is, did I really want to go to the country that I was born into for the first time with my whole family and not realizing what impact that could have on myself? And so it was in late 2014 that I started really thinking like, "Huh, maybe I should go to Korea first. I should really think about what does this look like for me as a person?" And so I had stumbled across Korean adoptee groups on Facebook in late 2014. And that was actually through, there was a blog called Land of Gazillion Adoptees that Kevin Vollmers was writing and I had stumbled across that first and thought, "Gosh, there's this community where I live."

Tara Tenhoff:

And I'd always known that Minnesota had the highest Korean adoptee per capita of any other state, but yet I had never really met any of these Korean adoptees. I met one in college and then outside of that, it was pretty limited. Through these Korean adoptee sites on Facebook was how I found out about Goal's, First Trip Home. And after doing some research I realized that this was probably my gateway into taking that first trip to Korea. So my oldest daughter was born in 2004 and it took me another 10 years to really come full circle back to that to say, I think somewhere someday I might be ready to take this leap.

Kaomi Lee:

And we've mentioned this on the podcast before, but Goa'l is the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link. It's run by adoptees for adoptees and provides a lot of services for adoptees in Korea.

Tara Tenhoff:

Yeah. Yes.

Kaomi Lee:

So you decided to go back on this trip organized by them for overseas adoptees to come back?

Tara Tenhoff:

It was targeted towards adoptees that had never gone to Korea before. And so I liked that I would be going on this exploration with other first timers like myself, plus the fact that it was an organization that was created by adoptees and continued to be run by adoptees, was something that was really impactful to me. So that meant that they really would understand. Some of the other tours are run by agencies or adoptive parents and so I just knew that I needed that different level of understanding that only other adoptees have.

Kaomi Lee:

So how old were you at this point?

Tara Tenhoff:

I must have been 39 because I had just turned 40 right before I went back to Korea for the first time.

Kaomi Lee:

Would you say that this was a period of, sometimes people call it the coming out period for an adoptee where you sort of suddenly just have time to focus on your past and being an adoptee?

Tara Tenhoff:

It definitely was. And I realized though that I also, for the first time in my life actually prioritized what that meant to me. And I really took that time to get my adoption file from my mom and really sit down and look at it. I had looked at it in the past as a teenager and a young adult having gone through the papers a few times, but I had never really studied it. And there definitely was, I think that kind of coming out phase and finally finding this Korean adoptee community that I never knew existed and meeting all of these people who suddenly understood what it meant the things that we endure sometimes just as adoptees.

Tara Tenhoff:

And so there was a definitely a ramping up phase where everything was new and shiny and exciting and, "Oh my gosh, there's all these people from coast to coast and there's all these people in my backyard and how could I not have known any of this?" It was a lot of ups and downs with finding the community for the first time, because there's a lot of people out there that can be manipulative and take advantage of others. And there is, I think sometimes just this sense of we're all supposed to get along because we're all adoptees too. So there's supposed to be this big sense of unity and kumbaya that's not reality either.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. And maybe this is a good place to say this that there's an estimated of 15,000 plus Korean children were adopted to our state of Minnesota. We both live in Minnesota, but it's not like, even today, you are on the street and you see the streets are full of adoptees. You don't. I think people think that because we're known to have had so many adoptees come here that we're just coming out of our eyeballs with adoptees. And in a lot of times even living, I mean, I live in the Metro Area too, and we're not that visible and it's certainly not as a block of people.

Tara Tenhoff:

I only had one Korean adoptee friend that I met in college and I was even almost reluctant to be her friend because what did that mean? What did that mean about who I was? Because I never really identified as an adoptee and her adoption experience was much different than mine and she embraced her adoption in a much different way than I did. And so for her to wear that badge of adoptee was almost more of an honor whereas for me it was one that I made sure were at the very bottom of my list of who I was.

Kaomi Lee:

And so where is that status now?

Tara Tenhoff:

It is who I am. And I can't ignore the fact that it is who I am and it's what's made me who I am. Even just going to Korea for the first time, I finally felt like for the first time in my life, I had permission to be Korean. I want to be authentic in everything that I do and who I represent and how I show up every day. And so now I'm okay to say I'm a Korean-American or that I'm a transracial adoptee and I can embrace that because it's who I am and I can't ignore that. And I think I tried to essentially whitewash myself for many, many years and just continued to assimilate into the life that I thought I was supposed to create as opposed to the life that allowed me to be more of my true self.

Kaomi Lee:

Let me go back to you're on the plane going to Korea for this First Trip Home. Were you afraid of what you'd find?

Tara Tenhoff:

I just kept saying, I don't know. I don't know if I'm going to find them. I don't know if they're alive. I don't know if they want me. And admittedly, I went to Korea with really low expectations. I really didn't know what to find. I knew that I had my family's registry that had my parents' birth names and my sister's birth name and my parents' parents' names, but I also was well aware that didn't mean that they wanted me.

Tara Tenhoff:

Because thinking back to having found that piece of paper that stated that my birth mother had willing relinquished me, I didn't know what that meant I would find on the other side. And so I admittedly went not prepared for reunification and with very low expectations and just thinking, this is my opportunity to see the country and eat food and see a few things and learn some things about Korea. And I almost saw it as I could check this thing off the list. It was just a thing I was doing and so I didn't know what to anticipate.

Kaomi Lee:

Can you think back and recall what some of your first kind of sensory moments were about Korea and what you saw or smelled or what some of your first impressions were?

Tara Tenhoff:

On the train on the subway going from Incheon into Hongdae, I was super aware of how quiet it was because I was having a conversation with a couple of the people from Goa'l. And as we were talking on the train, all sudden I was just like, I'm like really loud. It's so quiet on here. And so I kept trying to control the level of my voice because I realized it's very quiet on the train.

Kaomi Lee:

Were people looking at you?

Tara Tenhoff:

A little bit. A little bit. Not, I think overtly because it was later on in the evening too. And so I think had it been a different time of the day then maybe so, but I think I landed at l7:30, 8 o'clock at night. So there was a little bit different crowd, I think also traveling the trains. And I can't remember if it was a Friday night or what day of the week I flew in on, but when we got off in Hongdae, just the smell, I was like, "Oh." I'm like, "It smells like New York City." That was my first thought of, it smells like New York City. It kind of had that sewer smell and I was like, "Oh. Well, this is interesting." And then I thought, "Man, am I going to smell this for two weeks?" Luckily, no, but that was my first thought.

Tara Tenhoff:

And then just the realization of hearing the chatter of people talk was that, "Oh my gosh, I have no idea what anyone is saying." You don't necessarily intentionally just sit and listen to what people are saying, but you always recognize the words that they're saying. And it was that realization of, I cannot read these signs and I cannot understand what anyone is saying, just what I'm hearing in my ears. So I think those were some of my very first early impressions that I can recall.

Kaomi Lee:

And what did you like best about the First Trip Home?

Tara Tenhoff:

From Goa'l, the level of compassion and empathy that goes into the planning. There is a lot and these adoptees can relate to what you're going through because so many of them had been through it. For me I also appreciated the focus on the birth search since that was what I knew I was going there for. And in retrospect, might another tour have helped a little bit culturally and some of the other experiences that those other tours bring into their experience. But the level of compassion and empathy that my Goa'l trip had with the people that were working at Goa'l at that time really meant a lot to me. You could just tell how much they cared and how much they were there for each of us, even with some of the Korean nationals that were volunteering their time with Goa'l, you could tell how much they cared and they wanted to help.

Kaomi Lee:

And so how were you able to find your parents?

Tara Tenhoff:

Was when I was sending all of my files to Goa'l and really looking at them and analyzing them again that I thought, "Gosh, this piece of paper here, this has everything."

Kaomi Lee:

You were still on your registry.

Tara Tenhoff:

And I was still on the registry. And after learning that most, quote unquote, orphaned adoptees are put on their own single registry because there's no information given that having that registry was as good as having a social security number here in the United States. It was everything birth. It was the birth certificate, so to speak, but I still didn't know what that meant I would find. And so when we had gone to one of the city offices and the police officers sitting there typing, typing, typing into the come computer and I was chatting with one of my tour mates who is also a private adoption. And our interpreter turns to me and he goes, "Okay, we found you." And I was like, "I don't know what that means. What does that mean?" He's like, "We found you." He's like, "You still exist in the system."

Tara Tenhoff:

And I literally remember saying, "I'm sorry. Excuse me." I mean, he was saying, you're still a person here in Korea and that just was like, "Wow, okay. I don't know what that means." I exist in a country that I haven't lived in 40 years. You're telling me, you exist here as a person. What does that mean? And then we went to a different city office and she's kind of typing away and he was like, "Okay, we found your sister." I was like, "I don't know what that means?" He's like, "We can't find your birth mom, but we found your sister. We found your sister." And I turned to my tour mate and I said something else and he looked at me and he said, "Did you hear what he said? He said that they found your sister."

Tara Tenhoff:

And I was just so confused that I couldn't even process what they were telling me. And basically, he is like, "Okay, we found your sister. We're going to reach out to her." I don't remember if he said send the telegram or make a phone call. He's like, "But we're going to reach out to her." And I sat there and I continued to talk to my tour mate. And he literally kept looking at me going, "Are you comprehending what's happening right now?" And I was like, "No. I don't think so." And it wasn't until we went to-

Kaomi Lee:

You were in shock.

Tara Tenhoff:

I was. It wasn't until we went to lunch and someone else from Goa'l had come to join us and she confirmed, "They're going to reach out and call your sister and try and make that connection." That's when the gravity of what was about to happen just really started to sink in of, "Well, this is real."

Kaomi Lee:

I know that sometimes the reaction is when you say you found family, it's like a joyous kind of thing, but were you feeling joyous at that time?

Tara Tenhoff:

No. No. Gosh. I wasn't. I wouldn't say that I felt empty. I don't know. I didn't know what to feel. I was so confused. I was so overwhelmed and it still even took a couple of days from, "Hey, we found your sister, we're going to reach out to her." To your sister's coming to Seoul, I think it was about three days because I think we found her or they found her on a Thursday, Friday, and it wasn't until I think the following Monday. It still was even a couple of days of just the unknown and the wondering of what's happening? Is this happening? Did they reject me until that Monday? Because I had already done all of my pre-work to search, I was kind of a little bit in limbo. And that particular Monday I had gone to the police department with another group who was submitting DNA.

Tara Tenhoff:

And when we walked in, the police officer was talking very animatedly and I thought she was saying, "Oh, we've already taken your DNA. Why are you here?" Because I could tell she was speaking to me. And my sister was on the phone. They had reached her on that day and was on the phone. The police officer had her. And so when I walked in, they were waiting for me so that I could speak to her right there at the police station. And I remember my brain was spinning, I was sweating, I was crying, I was shocked and I didn't even know what to say, I didn't know what to do.

Tara Tenhoff:

And not all of the adoptee that were there even knew what was going on because it went so much from, "Hey, you guys are here to submit your DNA to why is Tara crying on the phone?" And I kept handing it back to the interpreter and she would talk and then she'd say something to me and I was just like, I don't know. And I just remember sweating and crying a lot and just being very, very confused. And then at the end of that day, her saying to me, they're coming tomorrow to Seoul. And so that 24 hours was just the whirlwind of just feeling almost blank and not knowing what to feel because I had no idea of what really was going to happen. I just felt very, very blank because I was so overwhelmed.

Tara Tenhoff:

We did the reunion at the Goa'l office. What I was told was that it was my sister and my mother that were coming. That evening before they came and that morning, the next morning as I was getting ready or that night, actually I would take a step back. So my roommate in Korea had also been a private adoption and Goa'l had found her family right before the tour. And so during that week when everyone was doing their birth family search, she had gone to stay with her birth family to get to know them better so I was actually in the room by myself. And they had asked, "Do you want someone to come and stay with you? Are you okay with being alone?" And I thought it's good I can decompress, I can work through this and I said, "I actually really prefer to be alone. I'm okay."

Tara Tenhoff:

But that morning as I was getting ready, one of the people from Goa'l had come and said, "I just want you to be prepared that there's a few more people coming that we had anticipated. Are you okay with that? We can call them and tell them that you're not ready to meet that many people." And first thing it's like, I had brought a couple of dresses and it's like, what do you wear on the day you're about to meet your family for the first time, right? That for me was just like, "Oh my gosh. I hope I brought the right dress." I mean, that's such a weird thing. And then I was super overwhelmed like, "I don't know, do I really want to meet all these people?" I just felt like saying, I don't know what I'm doing. But then the responsible side of me took over and said, you know what? These people just mobilized themselves from all over the country of Korea to come and meet you. This is it. This is your opportunity. So I was like, "Okay, I'll meet them all." Not realizing that there was like seven people coming.

Tara Tenhoff:

So when we arrived to the Goa'l offices, Goa'l was on the second floor of that building that they were officing in at the time. And we walk up the stairs and all of these ladies are kind of standing there and they're chattering. And I turn to her and I'm like, "What are they saying?" And then she's like, "Well, they all keep saying that you're really tall and you look like your father." And I was like, "Okay." They just kept saying, she looks like her father, she looks like her father. And ironically as babies, I think all Korean children, male or female, just have this tendency to look like boys. And so I remember thinking like, "Oh my God. They think I look like a boy." This was the way I was dealing with it in my head. I was so stressed out.

Tara Tenhoff:

But we sit down at this table and there's just all these people and they're all staring at me and they're all talking and I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, what is happening?" I'm so overwhelmed. And it turned out to be three aunts that had been married to my uncles as well as one uncle, one cousin and then my birth mother, my sister and her daughter. So it was such really a big group of people that I just felt like were all staring at me and it was very overwhelming. When I first looked at my birth mother for the first time, I thought I would look at her and recognize myself staring back at me and I didn't. It was a stranger and I didn't know how to deal with that emotion. And I almost felt disappointed that it wasn't this mirror looking back at me.

Tara Tenhoff:

I'd always had this vision, I think as an adoptee that when you found your family, it would be this mirror looking back at you and It wasn't that. I strained to find the resemblance in their faces. I was really needing that and I wasn't finding it and I actually remember feeling extremely disappointed. And almost as if this is the wrong family, this isn't right, these are not the right people. And it was wasn't until we started talking through one of the aunts that was there, because my birth mother wasn't there when I was relinquished. It was one of the aunties that was there that was talking through the nights of the relinquishment and she was providing some details that didn't go with the narrative that I had received from my American aunt.

Tara Tenhoff:

And so I finally asked being cognizant of the time that I was in the US, can I text my American aunt? And so I started messaging her and asking her a few things. And the craziest thing was these few little details that I'd never received from my American aunt suddenly matched this story that my Korean aunt was telling. And there were only details that people that were there could have known and this whole story started to fall in line. And then it was just this thought of, "Well, holy crap. This is happening. This is real. This is the family."

Tara Tenhoff:

And still not knowing what to do with all of that information, but just the confirmation of some of those small details that had never previous been given, but that were accurate and it was very overwhelming. It was very overwhelming to process, very overwhelming to realize that with the exception of my sister, because she's only two years older than I am and her daughter, that every other adult person in that room was someone that had interacted with me and known me as a baby.

Tara Tenhoff:

And I didn't know what that was like before. Even my cousin, he's the first adult cousin and he is a boy, but he had looked at me and said, "I fed you milk as a baby." And I remember nodding and shaking my head and thinking, "Oh, that's nice." Thinking, there's no way he could have remembered that, but then to learn that he's 10 years older than I am. And the realization that a 10 year old boy would remember the baby that he fed and my older sister was also part of that family, he would have of that recollection. And that was really impactful to realize that every person in that room with the exception of my sister and her daughter, they all had interacted with me as a baby.

Kaomi Lee:

Did you get the feeling that they were kind of looking at you like somebody who had died and come back to life?

Tara Tenhoff:

It was also very eye opening to me in that my adoption story I only thought about myself. I never thought about the other people and the family that it would affect in any other way. And my dad's side of the family, I had always been there. I'd always been a member of the family. Every couple years after [Trussof 00:51:39], they would say, "We have to find her. We have to find her." And it had always been my sister's life mission of, we need to find her. And my sister said that she'd gone to the three big agencies and left her information, knowing that I'd not been adopted through an agency, but just in case I had attempted to search and had gone through any of the agencies had left her contact information.

Tara Tenhoff:

It really weighed on me realizing that I'd always been part of their lives without knowing it. I had always assumed that once I had been relinquished that I had been forgotten and I wasn't prepared to find a family that had and always continued to love me and to remember me and continued to think of me as part of their family. I wasn't prepared for that. I think because as adoptees we're told that we've been abandoned or orphaned or unwanted, that was the truth that I knew and I wasn't prepared for something else.

Kaomi Lee:

So you've been reunited for how many years now?

Tara Tenhoff:

Six years. I found them in September of 2015. So almost six years.

Kaomi Lee:

How is it to try to build relationship across continents?

Tara Tenhoff:

Halfway across the globe, two different time zones, clearly a language barrier. My last trip to Korea, I did not use an interpreter. I realized that I had to get comfortable with utilizing some forms of technology and my extremely, very, not even baby Korean, but we spent four full days together with no interpreter. And it was probably one of the better visits because I think what had happened previously was the interpreter did all the talking, not only on my behalf, but then to my family and because they could just much more easily communicate with them.

Tara Tenhoff:

And so while there still was very some fragmented and disconnected conversations, we had a much bigger opportunity I think, to bond, but they're always very super conversations because you can't do a lot through interpretation using all of these different apps. I think last year, must have been right around Lunar New Year. I did do a very quick video chat with my sister. There's just a lot of waving and smiling and trying to send messages very quickly again, via Kakao. So we try, but it presents its own difficulties just in terms of forming that truly deep relationship.

Kaomi Lee:

Have you felt at all that your family has any expectations of you?

Tara Tenhoff:

I was prepared for that. I was prepared for the potential of that. They've never asked for money. They did ask me to come, right after I had had my second visit with them, they wanted me to come back a few months later for my younger brother's wedding and I could not. And so they'd actually given me money for a plane ticket, but I just couldn't because of work. And so then they said, "That's fine. Then you'll just use that for your next plane ticket to come." And that was really hard because it was a really significant amount of money and that I really struggled to accept that from them, but overall, no. There's never been any demands on me financially or that I have to kind of withhold my place in the family line there as to what I'm responsible for.

Kaomi Lee:

Do you feel like there's a sense of belonging when you're with them?

Tara Tenhoff:

I do. I do. Especially as this relationship continues to evolve. And it's not as if it's comfortable, because in a lot of ways I'm still very much a guest and they don't let at me do a lot of things. They just finally let me cut vegetables the last time I was there. I felt like that was a big deal that I actually got to participate in something because prior to that it was literally I wasn't allowed to do anything so yes. I have met, I think almost everyone on my dad's side of the family in terms of aunts and uncles and cousins and their family members, but even in just that kind core family unit with my birth mother and my older sister, just getting to spend that time with them and just kind of be together as a family whether it's cooking at her apartment or going out and shopping, it's just spending the time together.

Kaomi Lee:

What is it like being around your birth mother?

Tara Tenhoff:

In some ways, I think there's a lot of regret because it's so hard to have those deeper conversations of understanding how she feels and I think she feels a lot of guilt. She wasn't in Seoul because she's from near Busan. And so she had gone to Busan to earn money, as she put it, for milk and for medicine because my father was ill. And so I think she feels a lot of responsibility about the fact that it was someone on my father's side of the family who made this decision that they were going to relinquish me.

Tara Tenhoff:

On the other hand, I can tell that there is that relief of finally coming back full circle and her husband that she had been married too, they were married for nearly 40 years. So she remarried, she had two more children. They were all very gracious and welcoming me and opening up their home for me. So I think there's a lot of relief too, that she didn't have to continue to hide that secret any longer that she had hid for so many years.

Kaomi Lee:

Well, Tara, I know there's so much more we could talk about with your reunion process, but are there any thoughts of advice that you might want to share with other adoptees about reuniting?

Tara Tenhoff:

I think the biggest thing is that it is a never ending journey. I think you are the one who said that there's no playbook for reunion and that could not be a more accurate statement. There is no playbook for reunion, but it's never ending. It's always evolving. It's always changing. You have to be prepared for the variations in what you learn in terms of that history, but you have to be prepared for the different emotions that you're going to feel as you continue to progress through this.

Tara Tenhoff:

It took a while until I felt the elation part of reunion because I was so overwhelmed with all the emotion, but then once you come down off of that elation, there's so much sadness for everything that you have missed out on. And then figuring out what your new normal is, where you lay within all of that. So it is a journey. It never ends. There's twists, there's turns. You're going to go down one small pathway and perhaps find something else, but there's no right or wrong in any of that.

Kaomi Lee:

And if anybody wants to reach out, are you open to that? Can they reach you?

Tara Tenhoff:

I'm not as active on Facebook these days, but I am on Facebook. I am on Instagram. I pop in and out of the big groups occasionally and I try to stay as active as possible within this Minnesota community. There's so many of us and it's such a diverse group of people. I'm finding different ways to engage in our community here locally, as much as I can as well. So absolutely open to connecting with new people. My Instagram is taraten20 and my Facebook is Tenhoff TA.