Adapted Podcast:

Karen Lechelt:

I'm Karen Kelt. I live in Manhattan right now, and she or they pronouns is fine. I am a 50 year old creative living in Manhattan. I am a mother to a 15 year old daughter who is brilliant and kills me every day. I have a, a husband who is very supportive and has, and we've been together for a very long time, basically since I was 19. So we've grown up together and I find that my life is in constant flux, but I actually prefer it that way. So,

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. So, I mean, just for the listeners, I found you, Karen, in like the craziest way, but I've been addicted to House Hunters International, and I was watching this segment where there's this couple, this you know, interracial couple, a white guy and Asian woman and their daughter, and moving to Europe. And I just, for some reason I was like, I think she's an adoptee. Although you didn't say it, I don't think, but on the show.

Karen Lechelt:

Right.

Adapted Podcast:

so tell us, what was that like to be on the show?

Karen Lechelt:

I loved it. It was the most fun experience. moving to Amsterdam was completely surreal in a lot of ways. We never lived abroad before. And to have she was, at the time, I think my daughter was 11 years old, and for us to just decide <laugh>, you know, we moved basically a year after Trump came into office, or, and we told her right before the elections, look if Trump wins, we're leaving the country. And we kind of said it jokingly. And she was just like, can we wait until I finish fifth grade? And we're like, yeah, that's fine. So we moved abroad and while we were getting ready to move abroad, we were avid, avid house house hunters, international watchers, and I was like, I'm going to get us on this show. And so before we even left, I started applying and I wrote them and they said, okay, write us when you get there.

And we got there, and I'm not even gonna tell you the the real, real, because it will ruin, your experience of watching the show. But we learned a lot. I learned a lot. It was about a week of filming, and the, the crew were so much fun. They were so kind. They, it was just like a great time. And it was as all of our experience in Amsterdam and living abroad, it was just another thing to try out another novel experience for us all. You know, we have no aspirations of being on TV or anything like that. We just wanted to, okay, this is something that we don't know anyone who's ever done before. And we were like, this, this is just gonna be a lot of fun. What was,

Adapted Podcast:

Why Amsterdam?

Karen Lechelt:

well, my husband was able to get work there. We had been there once before and we really liked it. We found that it was an easy country for Americans to go to. Everybody speaks English. it is beyond gorgeous. The canals, the architecture, their love of art. it, it was an easy transition for us to make so and difficult simultaneously.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. So were you guys digital nomads, or were, did he actually work in Amsterdam?

Karen Lechelt:

I would say mostly a digital nomad. Okay. He's you know, kind of like works in the tech world, so, okay. That was an easy transition. And then for me I kind of stopped working in offices once my daughter was born. I think part of the reason why I was gonna be a stay-at-home mom was because I was an adopted child, and I was like, I am gonna have this connection with this human being that I have with nobody else on the planet.

Adapted Podcast:

So, and it makes sense that, that, you know, having a child brought up your own adoption and your experience. so I, I don't know where you and you're an artist, right? You're

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. Yeah. So <laugh> it's hard to call myself an artist, but yes I paint and I do some ceramics, and then I also do animations for a, a group who they write children's music. And so I make animated videos for them. Okay.

Adapted Podcast:

And what did you find, did you find that Amsterdam was really diverse and did did, do you have to explain that you were adopted in any, did that ever come up?

Karen Lechelt:

there was some diversity <laugh> in Amsterdam, but as I, I've met people most of them were expats from somewhere else. And the, I find that the Dutch that like white Dutch stated themselves, they're friendly on a very superficial level, but I didn't become friends with anyone who was Dutch. and I find that that's a common experience if you're, particularly if you're a person of color, like, you know, there's definitely a, a barrier there. And, you know, they're, they're colonizers, you know, and so they have a, a, a deep history with colonization. And I think that even though maybe the younger generations or even the older generations wouldn't acknowledge that or really understand what that is, I think that it's still part of their culture.

Adapted Podcast:

Okay.

Karen Lechelt:

And so I, I never, never became friends with anyone who was actually Dutch, so it never, certainly nobody was ever gonna ask me. I think I became friendly with a, a few people a British expat, and then a woman who was I think she was originally born in Texas, but then lived most of her life in Amsterdam. But it, I find it very funny because e she was a child, she was very young, but didn't never considered herself. Dutch considered herself a American, even though spent most of her life in, in Amsterdam.

Adapted Podcast:

so you mentioned with becoming a parent now your daughter is this precocious teenager. So what things did it bring up from your own adoption when of, of raising a child?

Karen Lechelt:

well, when I was pregnant, I probably cried every day on the couch, just mourning the loss of my own family and connection. And more than that, of being scared out of my mind, just terrified of how do I be a mother? I don't have a good relationship with the, the mom that raised me here. I don't think she was very maternal. And I have two brothers who are their biological children, and they would say the same thing. It's not just because I was adopted. So, you know, I, it was like a typical thing where I was scared, I was haunted. And I reached out to the adoption agency and I asked for my records, and I searched through everything, and I found that I had a very common record that said I was an abandoned baby found by a stranger, taken to, you know, a foster, or I originally sent to an or orphanage, then went to a foster family, and then was adopted to the United States.

The crazy thing about that is that, that story is, I, I did 23 in me during this time, and I found a second cousin, which blew my mind, and she and I wrote, and she all, she, she was adopted, and then her sister was also adopted from Korea. And all three of us had almost identical stories. And I, I was like, this can't be, it's, IM, it's impossible, where they're just, people just littering the streets with abandoned babies, you know, it. And so it, it really hit me hard too. Again, like, I felt like there was no way I'm ever gonna find a bi my any biological relative. And I feel like that's because that was stolen for me, you know, that there was, there couldn't have been any truth to, and and people have asked me, well, you could get in touch with the foster family and nothing against them, but I was like that.

I was there for a short amount of time, and that's not really the connection that I was looking for. And, and from what I read, also from the file the foster family fostered a lot of kids. So in a lot of ways, I felt like they were part of that whole system of taking children and adopting them, adopting them out. I mean, I think for the first time, once I had my daughter, there was a.to connect to. There was a line to go to because previously but there's nothing, you know, it was, it's almost like you were just like, you're an alien from another planet and you were, you know, dropped here on this planet with nobody else. And it's crazy to think like everybody has to be born from, you know, everybody is born, nobody's hatched. So, you know, I have a, I had a mother out there and a father out there, but I still kind of feel like I'll just never, never meet them.

Adapted Podcast:

Do you, does your daughter ask about questions about Korea or, you know, obviously she probably knows you don't have many answers, but do you feel sometimes like an imposter Korean parent?

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, mean, definitely. You know, I didn't grow up eating Korean food, didn't know any, really know any other Koreans. I think it wasn't until high school that I even had another Korean friend. I didn't eat Korean food until I was an adult, and I sought it out myself. And then I never tried making Korean food at all cooking. And then I, one of my best friends who I didn't meet until after my daughter was born, I met her at a co-op preschool. She's this Korean woman and she's a chef. She's an incredible, and she started teaching me how to cook food. and her mom also was a great cook. And so the two of them would introduce me to food and, and teach me how to cook. And that to me was like, I'm, you know, like, I'm gonna start feeding my child Korean food.

And I mean, it's not really Korean food because I'm just a terrible cook period, but at least I feel like she has the taste for, she has, you know, that spicy, that garlicy, that, you know, savory, all that. And living in New York, we go out and eat Korean food quite a bit. And and I think too that she was excited when we moved here that she has some friends who are Korean and she has some friends who are, you know, hopa like her who are half Korean and half, you know, a blend. And I think that's exciting for her. I think that that's an, you know, something that I think I feel removed from being Korean. She probably feels even, you know, one step further away. But it's, it's also very interesting that I, Korean, being Korean is such a cool thing now, you know, there's so much, you know, pop culture or this, and it's so people love Korean food and people love, you know, everything that comes out of Korea now is celebrated. And I <laugh>, I mean, at one point I said to somebody, I was like, where was H Mar when I was growing up? <laugh>?

Adapted Podcast:

So, yeah, no, exactly. And that it just, it's, it's so much easier also to embrace the culture because it, the it culture is just so popular globally.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. Yeah. I, I totally agree. And I think for a long time I felt guilty too, because I always loved like Japanese pop culture, you know? And when I learned more and more about the history between Korean and Japan, I was kind of felt like ashamed. Like, I shouldn't love Japan so much. I shouldn't love all the, like but that I had exposure to that way before I had exposure to Koreanness, you know, I felt guilt. Yeah. I, I, I think, you know, I, I don't know if all Koreans feel this way, but you know, definitely as a Korean adoptee, there's so much guilt that, you know, I, I've gotten, you know, I feel guilty about not identifying enough as being Korean. I feel guilty when people ask me, oh, would you speak Korean? Or, or even like, I, my pronunciation of Korean food is terrible, you know? And I, and all of it just constantly makes me feel lesser. Somehow or another

Adapted Podcast:

There's like a shame. Yeah,

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I was very young my mom grew up in Queens, and when my grandmother passed away, my dad and I were driving from New Jersey into, into Queens, and the car broke down, and the guy that came with the tow truck, he was a Korean man, and he was asking my dad, is she Korean? And my dad is, yes. And he of course said something to me in Korean. I had no idea what he said. And my dad had to go, like, leave the car. And the guy came back and he shamed me. Don't, you shouldn't forget where you come from. You shouldn't remember your language. You remember that you're o you know, Korean, and, you know, I was, I think 11 and I just shrunk, like shrunk into myself and feeling guilty and thinking, I, I have no idea what you're talking about. Yeah, yeah. You know,

Adapted Podcast:

I, and then you felt shame and then probably just ran away from that culture, like, okay, I don't wanna feel like incompetent again.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, yeah. When I mean, being 50, it was like, you know, we didn't have computers. There was no Google, there was nothing. Just, you know, I remember at one point I did go to the library and didn't tell anyone that I was doing this, but I like wanted to learn a little bit about like Korean history or Korean culture. And I went, I remember going into the children's section and looking, you know, they would have countries of the world type books and looking to see if I could find something about Korea and reading it a little bit, but not even taking it home just didn't even feel like I could. And I don't know why. Well, I know why <laugh>, it, it, I had confronted my mom why, I guess probably why I was pregnant, I'm sure when I was pregnant. And I said to her, you know, why didn't you raise me with any kind of Korean culture?

You didn't give me Korean food. You didn't tell me anything about, about it. And if anything, it was, you're so lucky, you know, you escaped poverty and you escaped a backwards country. And I mean, hon honestly, the things my mother told me, I mean, I grew up for a long time believing my mother was probably a whore because of the way my mother spoke about her. And, and when I said this, confronted her with this, she said, for her first instinct was, I never said those things. And then her, her second instinct was, I, I could, I didn't wanna raise you differently from your brothers. I said, well, what, we could have experienced this <laugh>, you know, I'm not asking you to give me a separate meal. I was like, this is something that could have been shared with the whole family. And I think, you know, I look back on the way they adopted me is I to, I very clearly remember them telling me how I flew on a plane by myself to the United States, and they met me at the airport and this and that.

And I, and I remember thinking, why didn't you come to Korea? You know, like I hear these stories of people flying to their children's birth countries and picking them up and, and learning a lit, even just the smallest amount about their country. And my, my parents didn't do any of that. And the, and there's, I guess, a willful ignorance that that's what bothers, you know, bothers me about it, is that her excuse was, you know, well, I didn't wanna raise you desperately. That's not how people did it. And you know, that's no excuse to me. Like I, I, I don't like it when people use, well, that's not how it was done, or that's not how, how people do things.

Adapted Podcast:

Oh, where were you raised

Karen Lechelt:

In New Jersey? I was raised in like, Middlesex, which is central Jersey right outside of New York.

Adapted Podcast:

So is it suburban, rural?

Karen Lechelt:

Yes. Very suburban. very suburban. The neighborhood was very white. it was a mix of a Jewish population and then a Christian population. And I think in elementary school I had one, two Filipino friends and one Chinese friend and then one black friend, and then the rest of everybody else was white. And then, oh this is crazy. I remember I had this one neighbor who one day there was a storm and an electrical wire fell down and he, you know, told all the kids stay back. And he was, and I remember going home and telling my mom like, he's so nice, you know, he was so, he took care of all of us. And my mom was like, he's not so nice. She is told me how when there were some there was a family that moved into the neighborhood that was a black family, and he put a burning cross out on his lawn, and this is the suburbs of New Jersey. And I just was shocked when she told me that. And then, you know, throughout my time living there, I had a couple of these instances where there was such blatant racism, like unbelievable people who were my neighbors and I grew up with forever. And I just thought, oh, like all of a sudden I'm seeing a whole different side of you. It, it was very strange.

Adapted Podcast:

And do you think that they saw you as a white child?

Karen Lechelt:

no. I don't think they saw me as a white child, because, you know, I had this one neighbor boy who was older, much older, and I remember one day walking past him and he was just like, oh, come here, come here, here. Shout out K. And then like, he, he basically had me shout out KKK and I didn't realize what was happening cause I was young and, you know, it was exciting to talk to those. Okay. And so it, you know, o obviously the second I realized what happened, I was horrified and I was like, what? I couldn't process what, what this person was doing. He would never have done that to anybody else. It was clearly, because I am the non-white person on the block type of a, a thing. And I remember people coming up to my mom and saying, oh, it's so great you have her.

I bet she cleans the house and helps you take care of everything. You know, like I was the help versus the daughter you know, I was clearly other, I was clearly different. I, you know, when I was much younger, my own brother who was four years young, I have two brothers. One's four years older and one's four years younger. My younger brother came home one day and he called me a chink. And he was like, my friend said, you were at chink, you're a chink, right? And I was like, couldn't believe. I was like, what? The freaked out. My parents came home and they, they both were, they came home and I told them immediately and my dad was just like, I, you know, so angry and upset. And my mom goes, oh, it's the same as just them, you know, saying that they hate one another.

And, and that, and then that was it. Like there was no further acknowledgement. There was no discussion of let's talk about what this means. And from a very young age, I've realized too my, my difference in, in the family, how the world sees me, how I see myself, how my parents would see me, how the family sees me, and all of that kind of, there's so much dynamic between what you, how you see yourself, how you see yourself within your family, how you see yourself in society. You know, there's just, it's just layers and layers and layers of identity. And I think it's so hard. Identity is such a difficult part for probably for everyone. And when you're adopted and my parents were white and in an interracial family like that, who wasn't <laugh>, the crazy thing is my mother's a psychologist too, that she wasn't willing to acknowledge that or help me through any of that was very difficult. And it's probably something that I still, I, you know, identity wise, it's hard for me to see myself and know who I am.

Adapted Podcast:

Do you have strong feelings about transracial adoption given, you know, your own experiences?

Karen Lechelt:

Yes, I do. <laugh> it's probably not a very popular opinion, but I feel like it's not acknowledged that you are buying a person, right? Because essentially that's what it is. Yeah. You, you, like, you think I'm bringing them into my house and I'm making them part of my family. And you are in probably every intention, not every intention, but that's the intention. But it, there's, it's always to me been framed. Like, these kids are so lucky. They're so lucky they're going into these homes that people are gonna love them and take care of them. And first of all, they're not always going into homes that are loving and the best homes for them. And then second of all, it's not acknowledging the fact that these people are getting something too. Something like, you know, these people that have the money and the ability to pay for something.

And that really bothers me, cuz I think that's an easy the easy way out is to, well, we'll just buy poor children rather than going to the crux of the matter, which might be providing stability for families to stay together. You know, providing an infrastructure where people don't have to give their children up for adoption or don't have to put them into foster care, or don't have to put them into an orphanage while they get back on their feet, rather than breaking up the families is why don't you keep the families together and put all that money and energy into maintaining that. So, you know, there must be needs, you know, for adoption. It's just such a, I feel like it's such a commodity that, you know, babies as commodities, it's, it's very hard, difficult for me. And you know, as I said before, like I don't have a great relationship with my mother. My father passed away. I had some very difficult, traumatic things happen outside of being adopted when I was younger. So I just look at it as it's not, it's not what every at the fairytale that everybody wants it to be.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. And in our culture, you know, I can speak for, you know, we both grew up in, in the states, you know, it's, but I think it's kind of global too. It's just the adoption story is really glo glorified. Right. And the, and the parents are, are really these benevolent Yes. People and the children are so lucky and they're, they're ha they're, you know, this, the, the narrative that we're all familiar with is that we're somehow better off than right. Yes. The awful life we would've had. I think in some ways all of us have gotten those kind of subtle and sometimes not so subtle, but things that our parents have said that are just kind of these like reminder, like, you should be grateful you're better off now. You have a better life. You have, you know, you get to live in America for one thing, you know?

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. <laugh>. Yes. Yeah. Oh, the first time I went to Korea, I was like, what? It's so modern. It's so, you know, it's not dirty, filthy, they have technology. They have everything and more that we have in America. It was like, blew my mind when I went there.

Adapted Podcast:

I think it's kind of, it's this, there's a weird feeling, at least I can speak for myself, being an adopted Korean that, you know, now that Korean culture is just so embraced, you know, in Hollywood and on Netflix and you know, that everybody is like into K dramas and into black pink and b t s and Korean food. Everybody, you know, wants a kimchi burger on the menu. And, and it's like, to me it's, I don't know if it's irony or the fact that, you know, society or the system, you know, I had to leave that because this was supposed to be the better, the, the superior culture, right?

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. Yeah. You know, it's very funny is that my husband loves the K dramas and I actually can't watch them. I find them to be so horribly fake. And I, and I know he doesn't think like, oh, this is real. But for me, like I don't wanna see that fake version of Korea because I, I don't know, I mean, I'm not a big into dramas dramedies anyway, but there's just something about it where I'm like, like, I love a good Korean movie, or, you know, like, but the, the krama is like everybody being so beautiful and every, you know, being so like, you know, watered down and just, I don't, it just doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather watch like the Korean horror shows, or I don't, I don't know. Cuz I guess it feels like maybe because I don't ha I feel maybe it goes back to that feeling of like, not ha being a real Korean. And so I don't wanna be spoonfed the fake Korean. Like, I wanna know what's real. It's like, even when we go out to eat, I feel like, is everyone in here Korean? Okay, everybody's in here is Korean, let's enjoy this meal. You know? But if I see like too many non Koreans, I was like, maybe this is not authentic

Adapted Podcast:

<laugh>. That's interesting. So authentic authenticity is really important to you.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, I, I, I mean, yeah, I, I maybe never even really said that out loud. Like, it never really occurred to me, but like, you know, like I just cannot watch the K dramas. And I think that reason is because it's just seems so fake.

Adapted Podcast:

But one of the things that I think of sometimes is that, you know, it's this, you know, Koreans to me have this they really value perfection and they really value well, they value money and they value you know, how things look. And I realize like most of us were given up because things didn't look good for the family and appearances mattered. I don't know, that was just my take. What do you, do you think, does that resonate with you at all?

Karen Lechelt:

I mean, I think, so I think it's funny, my, so my friend who I was mentioned earlier who's Korean and who we be, like just one of the closest people on the planet to me, she just came back from Korea and she was saying how, you know, she had a great time and she enjoyed the food and the woman there, you know, they've got beautiful skin and they're, you know, all like perfect and, and that pursuit of perfection, right? And her cousin spends 20 some odd minutes in the morning on just her skincare alone. And, but she was saying, she was like, they're all the same version, you know, there, she didn't feel like there was individuality. Yeah. So their, their idea, they're like all pursuing this, the same idea of perfection, which is kind of boring to me. And maybe that's why I don't like the K dramas as well, is like the storylines are always very similar and, and that the, their idealized perfection look is kind of the same,

Adapted Podcast:

Right? Because the, you know, plastic surgery being such a big industry, there is just this striving for just perfection and how you look would somehow give you like, you'd become a better person. You know, there, there's value put into the appearance. And also you're right, I, I lived in Korea for a year a few years ago, and they're very trendy. The fashion, which I'm sure you noticed, the fashion is very like that Scandinavian you know, kind of French Scandinavian Danish look, you know, but it's all the same. And I noticed like they're very on point fashion wise, but it's all kind of the same fashion. it's all very uniform.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. I mean, that's the thing is that at least with the, the popular stuff that comes out and is becomes popular here, like the music and like, I just have no, like, I, I watched the documentary on Black Pink and you know, just cuz I thought it was interesting and everything, but it, it's like the boy Bands of America, right? Like they're just like churning them out. They're just these talented young people, but they're in this machine that's just <laugh>. You know, like they used to export babies and now they're exporting their talent or they're their entertainment. and that doesn't appeal to me. But I mean then again, that they created some beautiful movies and amazing, you know, there, that's not to say that there isn't art and culture and beautiful things that come out of Korea, cuz of course there isn't some amazing stuff.

Adapted Podcast:

What, Karen, what sorts of decisions have you been making as a parent that are, do you feel like are a result of the way you were parented? Like maybe done things

Karen Lechelt:

Completely different? Yeah. Every, yeah, e every decision <laugh>. as I said, like starting from the very beginning, I was like, I'm gonna be a stay-at-home mom, which never, when I was, you know, it never occurred to me that that would be a, a choice that I would make. But it was like the second I became pregnant, I was like, whoosh, just hit with this wall of emotion, this wall of who am I gonna be as a a mother? What am I gonna be as a mother? And so I hope, you know, I have a very open relationship with my daughter. I hope that we have a trust and a bond and a connection. And I, I mean, I certainly have it on my end, and I do feel like even though she's 15, and I know that 15 year olds are notorious daughter, mother relationships can be just painful.

And there are certainly moments, but in general, I still think she is just wonderful to me. so it feel, I mean, in every way, I can't think of a way in which I don't do everything differently. And, and it's all, I I'm always constantly thinking too of what our, what I want our relationship to be now and what I want our relationship to be as we continue to grow and as we continue on in life. Because I think that that's very difficult when you're a parent is to not just be in the now and think, oh, I have to mold this child to be this way. I ha I often like, have to take a step back and think, I think I know what it's like to be a 15 year old, but I don't know what it's like to be a 15 year old today in today's world.

And I don't know what it's like to be a 15 year old with me as the mother and with my husband as a father. And that can be really difficult, I'm sure for every parent. And I think a, as an adopted parent in particular, you, you have this in the back of your head. Like, I, this child needs to know that they're loved. They need to know how valued and important they are to my life. Because you are missing, you know, you've got this giant hole in you that said somebody for what, and it's probably not true, but you still feel, or at least I do, still feel like somebody didn't love me enough that they had to just give me up. And the, the, the fairytale that is told to every, well, they loved you so much that they gave you up, well, you don't feel that way. Like, I just, I was like, come on, that doesn't feel like anything. And so I guess maybe the, the number one guiding principle I have with my daughter is she has to know how much she's loved and she has to know that no matter what, I'll always be there.

Unless you're in a similar position to ours, you cannot begin to fathom what it's like. There is something missing in my life, you know, before she was born a stability or an acknowledgement of there will will be somebody there for you always no matter what. And you know, my, my my dad passed away many years ago. he would definitely, I was much closer to my dad than to my mother. but even he would always back my mom because they, you know, that was their relationship. That, and I, I, I mean, I hate to say it, but ultimately I was his daughter, but I wasn't his daughter, you know? And

Speaker 4:

Are, are you estranged from your mother?

Karen Lechelt:

No I, I do my best. and I would say that my brothers also have a difficult relationship with her and some, and sometimes I have a better relationship with her than they do. My mom, we grew up, she's an alcoholic. She's always been an alcoholic. when I was younger, I would say that she has an abusive re you know, bordering on an abusive relationship with her children. She is just not a maternal person. And so we all really struggle to have a relationship with her. But

I, I would feel guilty if I, I don't think I could just completely shut her out. There have been times, you know, I, at one point when I was 19 or so, I was taking a year off from college. I was taking, I was quitting school. I didn't know when I'd go back, but I was quitting school and I was leaving New Jersey and going out to San Francisco with my best friend and, oh no, actually, before then, even I was just quitting school and I, I was moving out and for a year my mother wouldn't speak to me. I would call the house and if she answered, she would just say, I'll get your father. And I'd tell you what, I was like, this is a great year, <laugh>. but we, you know, I quit pretty quickly after graduating. I did go back to school and I was like, I have to get out of New Jersey.

<laugh>, my husband and I moved to San Francisco, and we lived there for 20 years. Then Trump came to office and we were like, we're leaving the country. So we moved to Amsterdam. and then when we were moving back, it was kind of a big question, like, where are we gonna move back to eat? My husband had some work here in New York and I was like, okay, it's pretty close to New Jersey. But I was like, we'll do it. because I am closer the closest to my younger brother who has two daughters who are this very close in age to my daughter, and and very close to his, his wife. So

Adapted Podcast:

Were you the oldest in your family?

Karen Lechelt:

No, I'm the, I was a middle child. Okay. I'm not very close to my older brother. He was pretty abusive when I was younger, so I, I've kind of ignored that, you know, part of my past and I'm, you know, but I don't reach out very often. We maybe s see them once a year or so.

Adapted Podcast:

There was actually a study done that just came out in, by the Korean Human Rights Commission, and they did a survey of, they've surveyed about 500 overseas adoptees just to find out about their outcomes in life and attitudes. And, you know, I think a third of adoptees had been Abu there was, they were abused in some way in their adoptive home. And that they found a really concerning pattern of, of issues with the adoptive mothers whether they were, you know, non nurturing or distant or there was some conflicts or inability to mother, you know, things like that. So I don't know the exact ratio, but you know, that's sort of, that's come out, that's something that is not really talked about or acknowledged, you know within the larger, you know, adoption community that perhaps mothers, you know, they're perhaps not being supported enough to adopt, or maybe they don't realize what they're getting into and they're, they, they don't maybe have the tools that it takes to adopt either transracially or Transnationally or, you know.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. I mean, yeah. That, that is very interesting because it's, I, I mean, I think it's so, so strange the way the, from, at least you know, what I understood of the adoption that took place, right? Is that there's this very long process. And and then one day I arrived on a plane and boom, that's it, that's the end. There was no follow through, there was no checking in, there was, there was nothing. And, and honestly, you know, my parents were like, oh, it was a very long process, but it wasn't so much that the process was, we're gonna make sure that this family is the kind of family that a baby should go to, or that a Korean baby should go to there. You know, nobody worked with them to be like, okay, here you're getting this baby girl from Korea. Here's some information that you might wanna, you know, one day provide her about where she came from, and you know, what her culture or, you know, just, just something, you know, it's just more like they were just checking the boxes of, you have enough money, you have a staple job, okay, now just wait and we'll, when we have a baby for you, we'll send it to you <laugh>.

You know, and it's just absurd. It's, it's kind of crazy that nobody checks back in and, and says, how is this working for everybody? It seems very careless. I feel like people go to adopt puppies now, and there's more rigorous about that than they are about adopting children sometimes.

Adapted Podcast:

Karen, what do you know about your story? Do you, do you mind sharing that, you know? Yeah, the, the only thing you know that was in the file said I was abandoned, left on like the doorstep of some sort of house. I don't know if it was actually a house or just a public building. And that somebody notified the police and then the police came and got me, and then they brought me to an orphanage. Orphanage. And then from the orphanage, I think I was there for a very brief amount of time, and then spent some time with a family, foster family. and it's, it, they had children of their own. And if I remember correctly, it was probably like the 10th time that they took in a foster baby. So and then, you know, you read things like, oh, she's very bright, she's very this or that, or blah, blah, blah. And I guess I came to the US when I was about six months old.

And, and this is also the other thing is that there was no note. There was no, please take my ba take care of my baby. This is her name. This is her birthday. Like, nothing, you know, so, so the orphanage gave me a approximate birthdate, gave me a name, and then, you know, I, I went into the, the pipeline and I wrote, I was, it was Holt International was the adoption adoption agency. And so I'd written them and I said, is there any more information? Is there any way that I can, you know, find out? And they were like, this is all we have. I just kind of left it at that. I, you know, I've heard people say that they've hired detectives and they, you know, looked in and, but I've also read, no, so I did 23 and me at one point when I was pregnant.

you know, I've also heard though that a lot of the families don't wanna be found. So I was like, okay, so I'm, I have no information and I'm potentially looking for somebody who doesn't wanna be found. I was like, where do, where would I even start? and you know, people have said, will you start at your foster family? As I said, you know, before, it's like I kind of feel like they're just part of the pipeline. Maybe they were, maybe they were great. Maybe they adored me. Maybe they loved me, like I was, you know, but I was like, I just kind of feel like, I don't know if it's like a, a movie that I'm seeing in my head or something, but I was like, it, it was, you know, just like, maybe it was considered a foster, but I was like, if they've had done this 10 times before, then, you know, I I I, they were just taking care of another baby and shuffling it through a system and they were ob it was just a waiting station.

Would you want to find family if it were possible?

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, I would. I, I would love to know if there was a sibling. You know, we always focus on the mothers, but I, I would love to, I think because I had a closer relationship with my dad, I'd love to know if there was a dad, you know, if there was a dad, who my dad was, what the relationship was. I don't know if at this point, you know, when you're 50, if you're like it, I need to know the reason why, because it's kind of irrelevant, right? I mean, you know, part of me is just like, ugh, I wanted, I wanted, I wanted to be a story where I was stolen from them and, you know, they were looking for me because somehow or another that would make me feel better. And, and you know, maybe my, you know, maybe it was just she was a, you know, single mom and couldn't support me and, you know, take care of me. It, it almost doesn't even matter. It would just be nice to know them and see them and feel like I have a story that starts before I came to the us.

Adapted Podcast:

When you look at your daughter, do you ever like, search for clues or signs about, you know, either traits or, you know, features?

Karen Lechelt:

It's, you know, not really. It's, it, it's funny cuz people will say to me like, oh, she looks so much like you're husband. Like sometimes. And I look at her and I'm like, really? I'm like, maybe her eyebrows are, you know, something like that. And so one day she took the iPad and she took a photo of her, and then she took a photo of me and she superimposed them. And when she did that, we fell into exact alignment. It was eerie, it was crazy. And the only difference were the eyebrows. And she and I were just, we're like, this is un like, but she doesn't really look like me, but obviously she does. And I mean, I, I was like thrilled, you know, inside my, like, I was just like dancing. I was like, yes, you know, like, obviously I know I'm her mother, but like this is my child, you know? And because I guess every time somebody says to me, oh, she looks like her dad, it somehow or another feels like they're taking something away from me because I'm like, no, this is my child. Like obviously she's our child, but she is my child in that. There's nobody else in the world that I'm connected to like this. And so it's, it just feel, felt so good when I saw that. and then she also tried the, to superimpose her face onto his and it wasn't a match. And I was like, see <laugh>, she's mine.

Adapted Podcast:

that's interesting. So it's like she's got more of his coloring maybe, but maybe like actual features are

Karen Lechelt:

Closer to you. Yeah, I think the features are the same. And I think some of hi her, his expressions, I think that's what it is, is that sometimes his expressions, she come out on her face.

Adapted Podcast:

<laugh>. Yeah. Got it. No, I was, you know, you lived in San Francisco for 20 years. was it kind of a conscious choice where I wanna go where there's a lot of Asians and, and when you were there, did that somehow feel healing or comfortable

Karen Lechelt:

<laugh>? Yeah. You know what's funny is that it, it wasn't because when I first moved out to San Francisco, I dropped out of college, moved out with my best friend, and Sheena, I, I knew, literally knew nothing about San Francisco. I like, I just knew it was like a funky kind of progressive city. And I got there and I was like, whoa. Like this is cool, you know? And then I, we lived there for like a year, a year and a half. And then I moved back, finished up school, and then my husband and I went back out and then <laugh> then, this is really funny, one of the first job interviews I ever went on to on for the, the girl before I got into the interview, she and I were chatting at the front desk and she was Filipino. And she goes, oh, where do you live? And I was, oh, I live in San Francisco. I live in the Richmond. And she goes, oh, you sh you should move out to Delhi City where our peeps are. And I'm looking at her and I couldn't understand what she was talking about. And then I realized, oh, because I'm Asian, you know? And it was like, you know, one of those moments where it was like, that's the silliest thing I've ever heard. But at the same time I was like, she thinks I belong. She said, our peeve, you know, she

Adapted Podcast:

Said, our peeves.

Karen Lechelt:

Our peeves. Yeah. And I was just like, what? Oh my. Like, I was like, that's crazy. And you know, I told my husband who's white, and he was just like, why would she say that? You know, like, and I was just, but inside I was like, Ugh. Like, yes, I am a peeps, you know? And, and in San Francisco, you know, in San Francisco it was where I be, you know, I learned more about Koreanness there than I had certainly, you know, growing. Oh. Although now it's ironic cuz now when I go to Edison, there's the hugest age mart, there's a giant Korean spa where the Acme used to be. And my parents used to go shopping at all the time, and I'm like, where was all of this? Oh, in New Jersey, right? It's so unfair. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I was, and then I was talking to another Korean guy.

so San Francisco was great because it, it, I would say that definitely I learned more, more about Koreanness, but even beyond that, just being Asian, you know, just being surrounded by Asian people, <laugh> like, you know, and not just a few, you know? And, and, and I think too, it was great to have Kiki spend her first. Like she was there till like she age of 10, and most of a good number of her friends were like her, where they were mixed kids. And you know, it, it wasn't so unusual or, you know, I I I still think that New Jersey there, you know, there's a lot, like, she's much more unique still in New Jersey than a big city. Although I met somebody recently, I go to a ceramic studio where it's like, I don't know, 80% Asian women. and there's this Korean girl who I met and she grew up in Palisades, and she was like, yeah, it's like little Korean.

She was like, she was like everybody, she was like, like 75% of the population there is Korean, you know, and Fort Lee and Palisades. And I was like, what? I was like, how come I never knew about this before? Yeah, the king sauna is there. Yeah. <laugh>. Yeah. So she, and she was like, you have to come. And she was like, you can't just go for, like, you have to go for the whole day and you have to listing out all these things. And, and you know what was really so great when she and I were talking, she was, she's younger, she's 30, but she and I were talking and I told her I was a Korean adoptee and everything, and we had this really amazing conversation about how she and her family have discussed a Korean adoptions, you know, and, and what their thoughts were on it and everything.

And I never before had a conversation like that with somebody who was Korean. I mean, she's Korean American, her parents Korean, and it, it was so in line with what I was thinking, and they were so angry at their own government, you know, their own country for what had happened. And it, it was a great feeling. It was a great feeling. I have to say, New York has been great, you know, I, I've met a lot of people and then I joined this ceramic studio. it's a Japanese traditional Japanese ceramic studio. the owners are Japanese, but every, pretty much, most of them are Asian. And I've met a lot of young, younger Korean people. And I don't know, like I feel so connected to these, these, I call them kids even though they're not even, they're, they're I guess, sort of adults.

But I, I just love it. I, I, it's funny because identity, you know, personal identity has always been so difficult for me. It's still, I think it's difficult for me, but like the, the more I feel like the more Korean kids I meet, especially Korean American kids, you know, that they fully are American, but they also fully embrace their koreanness. And I just like, it's so exciting. It's, it's so much fun, it's so exciting. And that, you know, positive energy, a about koreanness, about Korean Americanness really is like something that feeds me and it makes me feel good at the end of the day.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. I don't know if it's the times. I feel like Korean Americans that are maybe second gen or 1.5, there's just so much pride, Korean pride, and maybe, maybe it's even with first gener, first gen immigrants, I don't know. But there's so much pride and, and, and me being also Korean American that's been really like, I don't know. In some ways it brings up the imposter thing because I didn't grow up feeling proud to be Korean. and I know among adoptees, you know, there is this kind of, you know, we go out and, you know, we'd be as Korean as we wanna be, you know, and we're loud and proud and go to Korean places and dressing up in Hamburg, even if like non-ad adoptees aren't doing that as much <laugh>. But like, I don't know, I just feel like there's this real, like, it's almost like we have to go through those, that birthing process of feeling proud to be proud of our identities. do you feel like you've, like, well you've said you've connected with younger Korean Americans. Do you feel like, like when you were in the Bay and you would meet other Korean Americans, did you feel like you bonded or that that you felt felt a little different or that they accepted you?

Karen Lechelt:

I would say I, you know, I bonded, but my, so my, you know, one best friend, she is the one who more than anyone made me feel like I was Korean. She, you know, she would do these things. She would say these things like, oh, you're so Korean. Like I, you know, I, I don't even know. Like I would say something about cooking or something about the way I'd like something or the way I wore something or something. And she'd be like, that would be so, you're so Korean. And she meant it as a total compliment and, and it made me feel so good and so connected. And we were like, you know, we're like sisters in so many ways. And I would say that in general, like, you know, if I met other Korean people, there wasn't that connection. It was that one connect special connection that I have with this one person that really made me feel my koreanness and embrace it and really like step into it.

And then now I think being 50 and meeting these young Korean kids here in New York who are so, you know, they're so themselves. I, I, you know, I I I I just think that it's amazing that you can be yourself. You can be totally American and you can be totally Korean and you're so cool. Like there's just so, it, it, I impresses me so much. There's a little jealousy, <laugh>, but there's also just so much admiration and respect and love for it. And and I, you know, I I just think, ugh, it's so great. You know, even, even when we, you know, when we first got here New York was, and you know, of course there's always gonna be problems, but New York was really having a big problem with just in general the, the Asian hate. And, but even with that, like nothing I feel like would stop these kids from embracing who they are and being who they are. And, and you know, I think that's a really I, a difficult thing for some people is to just like, yes, I'm fully American and I'm fully Asian, and like, I'm fully Korean. I'm f you know, I'm fully this and fully that. And there isn't, that isn't a juxtaposition. They live side by side and fully enmeshed together and like, it's just beautiful to see that.

Adapted Podcast:

You mentioned that anti-Asian hate and you know, the violence against Asian people and the lens that that put on on racism, and didn't that make you feel more Asian when that happened? Or, or your own identity? Y

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, I mean, strangely enough I feel like it made me almost feel like more proud. Like how dare you, because I'm Asian too, you know, like one of those feelings all my life forever. I've always encountered Asian hate like that. You know, that's the thing is that we all have, I'm sure, experienced it, some sort of level of racism. And I mean, from elementary school all, you know, all throughout my life, some of it violent, some of it nonsensical, some of it, you know almost seemingly benign coming from people who thought they were my friends, you know, all, all of these things. but you know, I remember getting here and thinking like, you know, like, yes, I, I'm Asian and you have no right to, to be that. Like, I don't, I don't know how to describe it, like why I would feel like that would make me step up even further in being proud to be Asian. But that's kind of the way I, I went to, I guess maybe our first year back there was a, a rally and I went to it and it was in Times Square and there were a good amount of people there. But you know, in my head I'm thinking like, this whole city should be crawling with Asians and like us just like pushing back and not taking any of this

Adapted Podcast:

<laugh>, let's take over, let's take the city

Karen Lechelt:

<laugh>. Exactly.

Adapted Podcast:

Well, and I also think, you know, with this new like gold open for Asian, you know, movies with Asian casts and this, you know this general, like, you know, everyone's feeling this the same way about, you know, more representation, Asian representation or, you know and, and like Michelle Chung getting, getting the Oscar. And and it's something like we can all kind of, it's sort of like a unifying thing that we can all relate to no matter where we came or how we came in the diaspora, you know, that we Right, we can relate to each other on, on, you know, in this way,

Karen Lechelt:

Right? Yeah. I mean, and it feels too for, for the better and for the worse is like when one is seen, we're all seen, you know? And so it is just like when they're receiving accolades and when they're receiving awards for their successes, it's like they see us, you know, I, I, I forget the name of the movie, but they're, you know, and it, it's, it's a prevalent thing, right? It's not just with Asians, but it's with minorities or with otherness in the United States where it's like, you don't feel seen. And when you are seen it's hate.

Adapted Podcast:

It's negative.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah. It's nice. Yeah. It, it's nice to be seen in a positive way. It's nice to be seen. And I, I, I think a lot of that goes for me to, to back to identity is like to be seen not just as you're an Asian person or, or a woman, you know, like you're being seen for who you are, for what you've accomplished, for your unique identity and for what you can, you know, bring to this world like that is, you know, fantastic. And it feels like when, like I said, kind of before, like sometimes you can feel proud. Like I'm always rooting for the Asian person <laugh> because I feel like when they win, I somehow another win.

Adapted Podcast:

And I, I'm so happy when they're not just the, the sidekick, you know, it's like the Asian Yeah. Is the, is the psychic, but never the romantic lead or, you know, right.

Karen Lechelt:

<laugh>. Right, exactly. Right. And yeah, personally I str I struggled with that. I, I mean, you know, it was, I, and I think to back to being in high school or something, you know, my best friend was this gorgeous st I mean, she's still is gorgeous Swedish girl. And I was her sidekick and that's how I was known. And then I'll never forget, I remember when my younger, so my younger brother was four years younger, so by the time he was in high school, I had already graduated. And I don't know, like remember this exactly why this happened, but I remember, I guess he asked like some people who were older who overlapped with me if they remembered me and they didn't remember me, but of course they remembered my friend. And I was like, that doesn't surprise me. Like why would that, you know, that doesn't surprise me at all. So it's, it's that whole, yeah, this, the whole sidekick thing really is <laugh> thorn in my side.

Adapted Podcast:

Not to double down on the adoptee thing, but I mean, do you think it could be this thing? I mean, I had feelings too. I was always like a third wheel and I wondered if, you know, maybe we just didn't feel like we were enough.

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, I mean, a sense of belonging, like where do you belong? Who do you belong to? Do you even, you know, it's, it's even like on some level another like, do you even belong to yourself? Cuz it is like, there's no ground beneath your feet. You're just kind of treading water and trying to figure it out. And so how can you belong with other people if you don't even, you know, if you've never belonged to a clan, how are you gonna belong to a new clan? I I, when I was younger, I remember, and I still kind of do this. It's really terrible. I, I don't know if it's terrible or not. I think of it as I look at it now as it was my defense mechanism, right? I was like a shape shifter. I I, I remember this one particular setting. I was in my parents' church, like youth group type of thing.

And I was sitting there with all the older kids and the youth pastor, whatever, and we were all having a semi-serious conversation. And then a group of my peers came in who were my age, and I like, started hanging out with them and blah, blah, blah. And the person who was leading the group had said to me, he is like, wow, I'm, I'm really impressed how you shifted gears like that. And I remember one of the older kids were like, oh, she's just a po you know, like, calling me a poser or fake or whatever. And I, I, and I have this thing where when I'm with like a certain group of people, I'll change slightly to adapt to them. And part of it, part of it is probably like, oh, I want them to like me, or I want them to feel comfortable with me, or I wanna feel like I belong, I belong to them.

And it's not even a conscious thing. I don't do it consciously. I am not trying to, I'm, I don't even feel like, oh, I'm trying to fit in so hard. It's just something I naturally slip into. And I think that comes from, didn't fit into my family, didn't fit into school. Where do I fit in? Because when I, when I am, you know, seeing for who I am, sometimes people are not gonna like that. So, you know, who am I? How do I fit in? And I know I, I still do it to a certain extent and it's like, as I said, it's a definitely a defense mechanism. It's definitely a feeling of never truly belonging. And, and I, I think that's what I was saying before, like, do I even belong to myself? Do you know, am I allowed, I can be alone for a very long amount of time and feel very comfortable with it. And I think because when I'm with myself, there's, there's no pressure, you know, I totally

Adapted Podcast:

To be something for someone else. Yeah,

Karen Lechelt:

Yeah, yeah. I'd written a children's book years and years ago when my daughter was five, I think actually written it before, but it was published when she was around five and it was called what do you love about yourself? And the whole i whole thing of the book is, you know, self-love. And I think as a Korean adoptee, it's really not, maybe not for every of them, you know, maybe people are just like, call me all my bullshit or whatever. But for me it's been really hard.

Adapted Podcast:

Okay. How should people connect with you if they want to?

Karen Lechelt:

they, yeah. They can look at me at MoongirlKaren on, on Instagram. That's the best way to find me, I think. Okay.

Adapted Podcast:

All right. I'm gonna follow you

Karen Lechelt:

<laugh>. Oh, good. Yes, please do.

Adapted Podcast:

Okay. Well thank you so much, Karen.

Karen Lechelt:

Thank you. I'm sorry if I was like, I tend to just go off on tangents.