Adapted Podcast:

Eric Pool is a 55 year old block cor adoptee who reminiscences about his life in part one of a two-part interview. In this episode, we'll hear about his first memories living in a US military camp town in Korea, learning to survive in an orphanage and of a black soldier who became a lifeline and symbol of hope for Eric. Here's Eric.

Eric Poole:

So my name's Eric Pool. I am 55 years old. I live in just south of the Twin Cities. So I'm down in Northfield, Minnesota. Been down here for 23 years now. Three children. Lucia, who is a freshman at University of Arizona; Malcolm and Miles who Malcolm's in high school and Miles is in middle school. So they're kind of our, our day-to-day life. My wife's name is Mary. She's from Fargo, Moorhead area. Met her in college. Went to school at the University of North North Dakota on a football scholarship. Discovered aviation or at least I'd like to say, you know, aviation kind of discovered me kind of thing. I became a pilot. I'm currently a, a captain at JetBlue Airways out in, in New York. I am also what we call a chief pilot.

Chief pilots essentially manages the pilot group, so I fly as well as I do personnel and operational management out of Newark, which is our newest base. yeah, and I, I've been in JetBlue I'm on my 18th year. it's, it's been an exhilarating ride. I really found a company that really kind of aligned with, you know, my personal values and personal perspective to work for a, a really, a kind of a progressive company that thinks in a way that I feel like I think it's been, and it was a startup essentially when I got hired. So when you get into a small company, there's a lot of room for you to do a lot of different things, and I've been able to do that. And so it's been, it's been exciting. I think for me, I feel like I've been part of the build of the airline since.

Adapted Podcast:

Well, one of the things, kind of the elephant in the room too, is I've heard you speak that, you know, and especially like US commercial aviation, that there are few Black pilots.

Eric Poole:

Yeah.

Few pilots of color period,

Adapted Podcast:

Pilots of color, period. What is it like to be in an industry where it's mostly white male pilots?

Eric Poole:

Well, I think this is the beauty of growing up in Minnesota. Like, I'm very comfortable in an environment where I may be the only or one or two. So I, I've, I've learned to navigate this, and even in Korea when, when I was a little kid being biracial in Korea, you're, you're, you're oftentimes an outsider. So I, I think from the onset of my existence as a human being, I've always learned how to navigate being the outsider. And so I, for me, I think that personally that that is within my wheelhouse of what I do well. having said that, I, the thing that I'm probably most proud of in the, in industry is, is really kind of, you know, keeping the industry honest in, in a way we can provide access and opportunity for women and, and people of color to become pilots.

the big barrier to becoming a pilot is money. it's, it's, it's highly costly to get into aviation. Even a collegiate aviation program, for instance, for me, my, my full scholarship only covered tuition and room and board. it didn't cover the aviation costs. So the aviation costs. So, and oftentimes more than double the cost of four year four years of college. So it's, it's, that's, that's the big barrier. And then the second barrier is, is because there aren't o others that look like, look like you doing this type of work or or maybe family members, it, there isn't an opportunity in or exposure. And so it's I do a lot of work, especially with JetBlue. I've, I've been able to kind of formulate a team to in support with our JetBlue foundation that creates these ACE academies in, in partnership with the FAA and the organization for Black Aerospace professionals, where we set up week long camps and a lot of pilot volunteers that, you know, our our goal and mission is to, to give, give some exposure to, to young kids who would o otherwise never get that exposure.

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Do you get some sense of satisfaction, maybe, I dunno if that's the right word, that, you know, at the end of the flight you come out and people, you lock eyes with people, and then they may be surprised to see a person of color flew their plane?

Eric Poole:

Yeah. Well, and, and it's funny and I had a conversation with a couple of our black pilots. So part of our shtick at JetBlue is, is that we really encourage our pilots to get out of the flight deck, right? And so you'll, if you're on a JetBlue flight, oftentimes you'll see a pilot in the front of the cabin saying the welcome aboard instead of from the cockpit where you just hear it over the pa. Right? and this was something that we, when I got hired here, it was kind of our, our kind industry shtick. and I, it's sometimes intimidating to speak in front of 200 people, you know, but it's one of those things. And as I did more and more, I got, I got used to it, and then I started having the interactions with, with people. and I will tell you so being a pilot of color, there's, you know, there's, it's like two ways how these things get sliced.

One is oftentimes you're, you're not mistaken, or oftentimes you're mistaken for something that you're not, meaning non-pilot position just by the function of how you look. and, and the other part of it is the impact that you have on people, just because, so, one of the most heartwarming situation that I had, so I was, I, I forget where I was going, but I had a, I was doing a standup pa, there was an elderly black woman sitting in the front row. and as I was doing my spiel, I got done, she kind of reached out to me with kinda shaking hands, like shaky hands. And I, I put my hand out to her and she grabbed my hands and she kind of pulled me in close. And she said to me, I'm so proud of you. Like, my, my husband always wanted to be a pilot, you know, he'd be really happy to see you flying today.

And I was like, it just kind of like took my breath away, you know? And it, it was a really emotional moment. The other side of of that was, I was, again, there were, it was an elderly couple. A gentleman was on in a wheelchair, wife was helping him. and so she was struggling with bags. So I, I was kind of helping them put the bags over in, in the bins overhead and just getting them situated. the, the lead flight attendant wasn't in, in the position where, where they typically are cuz she was in the bathroom. So the gate agent kind of came, came back later as I was just talking to them, said, Hey, captain is it okay we bring the rest of the customers on board? I said, yeah, just make sure you ch check in with the flight attendant to make sure they're ready.

And and then the lady says to me, she goes, are you, are you our pilot? And I said, yes ma'am. And then the her husband, I obviously, it was hard of air hearing and he says something really loud, it's like, "is that colored boy taking us down to Orlando <laugh>?" Kinda like, and she was mortified and she goes, "you are talking way too loud." Right? And, and everybody else just kind of like, wow and the gate agent left. And everybody's like, oh, geez. And I, I went up in the flight deck and I had a young, my FO was a young younger guy and he's just kind of chuckling and he goes, he goes, what year are we, did that guy call you a color boy? Like, is that <laugh>? And I said, you know, this is one of those situations where, you know, I, I could be upset, you know, it's his age, right?

Like that's, that's, and maybe with him, he had no ill will in calling me a colored boy. But it's just almost, it's in anachronism, right? It's, it's, it's one of those things where you're like, oh, okay. Like impact. But everybody else, and I remember that night, we, we all went out to dinner and they were all, they were all still talking about it, you know? So yeah, I think that's, that's, you know, those, you know, there's, I gotta take the good and the bad together, right? It's like I, I, I relish and, and hold the fact that to have a an old Black woman, you know, being able to see me in, in, in this role as a, as a, as a pilot and, and, and her sharing with me that her, her husband always wanted to be a pilot, but he never had the opportunity, right?

So that's I the other part. So I just recently listened to an interview of Neil Degrasse Tyson. it was on CNN. And, and it was kind of the same thing, like when, when Mike Wallace asked Neil DeGrasse Tyson about being Black and a astrophysicist, how important that was for young kids. And, and he, and I think alike because we're in these kind of unique situations, like he, exactly what he said, what I've been saying for a long time was like, yeah, look, he said, let me flip this a little bit. It's, you know, it's, yes, it's important for kids of color to see us in, in these positions, but it's, it's equally important for white people to see us in these positions, right? Because at the end of the day, they, you know, they're the ones who hold the purse strings of economics and all these other opportunities that, for them to be able to like reframe who can do these jobs, are really important, right? And, and that's, that's been always my, my thing with our pilot group, oftentimes the, the value of us being present in, in the places where, you know, we're, it is unconventional to see women, to see people of color in these roles. And, and it's, it's equally important for the white Am ericans to see us in these roles.

I have a hard time like discerning what actually happened and some of the things that I know actually happened. It still feels like a dream. And that little kid is not the same person I am today. Kind of, you know? And it, it gets really murky. but, you know, the earliest memory that I have is with my mother in [inaudible] which is near the demilitarized zone in South Korea. And it was a small little village just outside of Red Cloud Army Bay. And there was a, there was a river that kind of flew that flowed through that community. And I, I remember telling my wife this, cuz I've told this story to my wife, like, my earliest memories of is kind of, of, of abandonment. Like, cuz my, there was a flat rock in the middle of the river and, you know, during the rainy season, that river would flow because all the water was escaping the mountains.

And invariably like somebody would fall in the river and drown. And, and it was, it was really kind of perilous and we were warned of that when we were kids. But during the summer, not not rainy season, the river would just flow as a trickle. And, and so there were just these beautiful rocks that, that, that were there. And I, I remember my mother setting me up on a blanket on the rock, and she must have gone, gone back to the house or something, and I must have been napping. And I woke up and she wasn't there. And I just remember crying. And that was kind of a really early memory that I had. And then the other early memory was in, in the men's journal article where I shared about being in the train station with my mom and getting kind of the boo and the hiss and from the Koreans, because she was obviously holding a, a child that was not Korean full-blooded Korean.

And, and you know, her dealing with that. And the thing that I realized was the enclave of the little village. And, and we found out when we went back that village, it was called Texas Alley, right? and Texas, the word Texas was kind of a colloquial pejorative for prostitution. And so all the kids in that village were mixed race brown skin because they were Afro Korean mixed race kids. And we were really sheltered in that place. And it was sheltered in a way that we, we didn't really interact with kids that weren't like us. So it was like, I feel like that was the only time in my life that I was with my people <laugh>, you know, if that makes sense. And that village kind of insulated many of us from the negativity of our existence in, in, in the Korean soil. So those are kind of the two early memories that I really carry with me. so I can, I can still, it's not vivid certainly, but I can still picture my mother.

Adapted Podcast:

What was she like?

Eric Poole:

it, it's, it's really difficult for me to think in detail about what she was like or how she was. I just, the, the thing that I can, I always hold onto is have you heard that Maya Angelou saying about it's not how, what people say or what they do, it's how they make you feel. Like I've, I've always kind of held onto that feeling of, and obviously as a child, I just had no worldly context of our two, our existence in a way. But, you know, I I I do feel the, like when I think of her, it's, it's the warmth and she, the nurturing and, and being protected by her in, in so many ways. But yeah. And that was why it was so devastating for me when, when I found her, you know, passed away when she passed away from carbon monoxide poisoning and I was maybe four years old or five years old, you know? So

Adapted Podcast:

She made you feel loved.

Eric Poole:

Absolutely, yeah. Very, very early on.

Adapted Podcast:

And do you believe if she hadn't died, that untimely death that you might have stayed in Korea?

Eric Poole:

So, and I, I don't know where I'm getting this from. I think the goal was always to have to go to the United States, right? I, I think she knew that my future was gonna be bleak and our future would be bleak in staying in Korea. you know, it's, you know, obviously it's a very patriarchical society. I mean, it was and, and Korea was in a profoundly different place than it is today, right? and I, I remember telling people it was, it was abject poverty, third world. Like when I was a kid there were very little paved roads. I still remember the, the, the men that their job was to carry human feces in these buckets with a rod across their back to fertilize the rice fields kind of thing, right? Like so that's not a very advanced society.

and that, that's within my lifetime. And to, for, for that society to be able to, you know, think through all of a sudden these children that are Sid by foreign warriors that came onto the, you know, that's on their country, I think it was, it was really difficult. And for us we, we knew that we couldn't go to public schools. so education wasn't an option. So I think she, she, I felt like, like she was working to, to get us to the US or, or wherever I, yeah. So I, I'm assuming it was the us cuz I think my f my father was an American soldier, obviously cuz we're right outside of American military station. So Yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

You know, this thing called ambiguous loss, you know, it, it sounds like no, you know, you don't know where she, what became of her or maybe the villagers burned her body or

Eric Poole:

Oh yeah, yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

How does it feel to, you know, the loss of your mother and you can't, you don't, you have nowhere to return to, to pay respect.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. I don't think I spent a lot of time kind of processing that in that way. You know, I oftentimes feel like my early childhood, how I kind of, how I became to be, was like after my mother passed away, like every day, you know, was just existing. Right? and, and so I don't, like, I think that's one of those things that I, I process and talk, think more through as a, as an adult than I did as a kid. Like, I, I wasn't, I I didn't, I knew, I felt like I knew the finality of death, right? So there wasn't any way I can get back to her. I think she was a practicing Buddhist cuz there was a Buddhist temple that was across the, the river that oftentimes she went, not that I knew anything about Buddhism for whatever reason, the, the, the duality of her being a prostitute and, and going to a place of spiritual fulfillment for her I wasn't a part of that whole experience for her.

and I, I certainly didn't learn anything from it. I, I just think I, I realized, and maybe somebody explained it to me how fine, how final her death was and that, that I'm gonna have to move on without her, how that looked. Nobody really told me. Right. And so every day I, I would wake up and in the village, I think for, and I, I don't even know the timeframe, but the village kind of took care of, took care of me for a while. there was an elderly lady who would oftentimes take care of me when my mother wasn't available. And, and so I know she was, there was

Adapted Podcast:

Already, there was already a system of kind of kinship care.

Eric Poole:

Yeah, yeah. You know, the old saying of takes a village to raise a child. I think that was that was certainly in existence there. and then there were other women who had mixed race children that I, I remember I stayed with another family that had two biracial kids. One was older I think they were both older. One was a girl and one was a boy. yeah. And that wasn't really ideal cuz it was really really violent. the older boy <laugh> would always beat the snot outta me all the time, you know? and a lot of us just kind of existed with no guidance or no parental guidance. We just kinda existed. So as far as the kids were concerned, it was a little bit lord of the fly ish, you know?

Speaker 5:

Right,

Adapted Podcast:

Right. and I think we should mention also that your mother and, and the other women along the, that, that camp town, they were, they were, it was part of state-sponsored sex work.

Eric Poole:

No, absolutely. Yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

And both the United States and the Korean government were fully, you know part of that, you know, organized that these young poor, not always young, but poor, marginalized women were kind of made available to provide sex for the US servicemen.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. And I oftentimes, I, you know, whenever I talk about my story in a public place, it's like, you know, my existence as a human being is the worst form of geopolitics. Right. War, because as a result of the Korean War and the associated police, police action is that, that two nation in collusion, you know, solicited poor Korean women into prostitution and complicit was the American military. Right. And so there's a process in which they would check, check out the women and give them authorization and a card, so to speak, to sh show to the military soldiers that they were in fact checked. Right. And so yeah. It's, it's, it is that, and, and the byproduct of that other little human beings like I was Right. And, and, and then nobody wanted to take ownership of, of those people. Right. And it's, yeah, it's, it's really sad.

And I feel like, you know, obviously it was again duplicated in Vietnam because it's, it's a, it's a very similar tale that happened after the Vietnam conflict. And I, I, and I I think one of the things that I, I realized when, when that men's journal story went public was I, I had a young lady reach out to me and she said, thank you for telling my story. And she, she, and I was thinking she was Korean or maybe Vietnamese, cuz those were kind of the similarities that were people that were reaching out to me. And she happened to be from an eastern black country. Her father was a Soviet soldier. Right. Kind of the same thing. And I was like, wow. You know, and it kind of like a light bulb, a eureka moment happened for me realizing, you know, there's probably a story that needs to be told where we have any place there's a military presence, that these things probably happen fairly frequently. Not just American soldiers, but other countries as well. And so, yeah. And at the end of it all, it's the women and children who, who succumb to, to the the kind of negative consequences of that, you know?

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So Eric, you grew up in a village where there were a lot of other kids like yourself and always kind of you knew that your place was not there. That you were destined to go to America. Were there yeah, American soldiers, black soldiers that would befriend you guys or take care of you or someone you would look to for that kind of connection to America?

Eric Poole:

When I was at the village there was a lot of interactions with black soldiers. I think in, in, in a lot of our original learning of the English language came from those interactions, kind of the African American culture, music, like stylings were all kind of present in, in our village. Right. So that, that was kind, that was my rooted in perspective of what America was all, all about. And then I, I, I was placed in the orphanage, orphanage system at Holt and there was a, a soldier that would come and his name was James Singly, and we called him singly. We actually affectionately called him Sergeant Pig because he was a big roton gentleman. Right. And, and we would just climb all over him anytime. And so, and he n not because I knew this, because he, he had told us, but he obviously had affinity for the black children that were there.

Right. And I when we went back for, for that art article, one of the things that Molly hol to ran the orphanage said, you know, she was like, yeah, I remember singly and I remember everybody critiquing singly that she would on, he would only take the black boys. And she'd say, but it was the black boys who needed him the most. Like, cuz there was a narrow window of, of adoption that happened to us. So I would see mixed race white children, but they would be so transient. Like they would be there for a couple months and then they'd, they'd go to Europe. then I, I remember kids going to Denmark, Netherlands, Australia, as well as the United States and Canada. It, it was like, again, the, these were things that weren't really articulated by anybody other than the fact that we kind of knew that white kids, we didn't really befriend the white kids much cuz they were all gonna go, the only full Korean kids that we interacted with there had disabilities.

So at the whole orphanage, either physical or, or me mental disabilities. So those were kind of our interaction and, and it was always kind of the race against your birthday to get you adopted. And so I think singly was, you know, well aware of it cuz he, he would also visit. And there was a whole a living arrangement in downtown Seoul where the older kids, I ended up transitioning from the young kids, I think, I don't even know, I'm, I'm making the age up, but once you hit mid-teens, it, it really didn't work in, in that environment to be with little kids. Older kids would be transitioned over to a more of a kind of a foster home, well, group home, I guess it's more of a group home setting as opposed to be, as opposed to an orphanage setting. And so I know that singly would, would oftentimes go there and, and, you know, interact with those kids as well. And like, you know, we talk about people with really like this humanitarian spirit. He, nobody asked him to do it. He just did it. Like he would spend his his days with kids in need. And I don't, I have no idea, like why, and I never got a chance to get reconnected with him when he, when he came to the when I was adopted in my adult age to, to ask these questions. And I really regret that. I never did. You know? So.

Adapted Podcast:

And just to flip that on you how did he make you feel?

Eric Poole:

Yeah, I think that was exactly the same as my mother, right. Warmth and love. And, and I kind of understood that he didn't need to be there, right. Because there were some SA Saturdays or some days that we were expecting him, waiting for him to show up and he didn't show. Right. and obviously he had, he has a, he had a life to live. But I think for us, just the, the disappointment of not seeing him was huge. And yeah. So I would say our, our, our existence really revolved around our interactions with him for a little while. We've kind of forgot who we were these kind of outcast kids, you know, the land of the misfits kind of thing. And, and we felt like we had some sort of connection to somebody, you know? And, and yeah, that was, I think for me, that was, and, and I can, I think I'm, I'm speaking for all the kids that were impacted by him was that yeah, he was always the highlight of our, our week, our month or whatever, you know, whatever. He, he, he showed himself and especially took us out, out of the orphanage into an environment. And I applaud hold for allowing him to take the kids, you know? And I don't know, in, in, in today's culture, they would let, let that happen. But, you know, it, it was so meaningful for us. so

Adapted Podcast:

How long were you at Elson and also at the whole orphanage and also what were the conditions like there?

Eric Poole:

so I left May of 75. I think I showed up August of 73. I think I, I, I'll have to look specifically the date. I just know the date because August 20th is my birthday, which is not actually my birthday <laugh>, but you know, they just kind of, they use that as the date of birth kind of thing.

Adapted Podcast:

The day you arrive at the Holt orphanage is your birthday.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. So you know, back in those days, I think birthdates in Korea wasn't, was not really significant. Right. We didn't like, as a society, what, like, you were one year old when you were born and then every new year everybody gained an age or gained a year kind of thing. And, and so I'm sure I told them how old I thought I was based on that Korean structure, and they probably put a put a year to it and, you know, whatever. I don't, you know, it's kind of a running joke for many Korean adoptees. What is our real birthday, you know, kind of thing. As far as the facility, I, I think it was really well run. it was clean and I, I, I don't really remember just kind of going back to the grounds in 2017, I felt like, I felt like I remembered the land very, it, it, it was similar.

And so the buildings were relatively new at the time. They're modest, but, you know, they were and the place was humane. I felt the, the only thing that I, I just remember was the amount of religiosity that was associated with, with the orphanage. so they would bible lectures almost daily. we also would learn English from the Bible. there was a lot of church and bible things going on. And so it was, and it was one of those things where it was really like, like presenting Christianity through the, through fear and, and fear to like, if you don't do good deeds kind of thing. So it, it, you know, if I was burn

Adapted Podcast:

Hell, you're gonna burn in hell. Yeah.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. I mean it was, and as cynical as I am about re organized religion, that it was, it was a mechanism to control kids <laugh> the best that they could. Right. Like yeah. So that's, that's kind of where I felt like I, I, you know, I was introduced to Christianity through, through that orphanage. and it was just, it was like drinking through a fire hose. it was a lot of it,

Adapted Podcast:

You know. I know you've met Molly when you went back in 2017. Molly Holt the daughter of Harry and Bertha. And what did you make of her and what, how do you feel about the Holtz today?

Eric Poole:

I think for me, I think I applaud them for them actually creating a sanctuary in a way for, for the unwanted children, right. I, I think, I think they should be applauded for that. you know, and, and I think Ben Percy alluded to it on the, on the article is that there was a lot of things that were going on that had, that had nothing to do with them. You know, they just created the, the structure in which they and I, and I think their, in the intentions were all pious and good. And, and, and I think at the end of it all, just different humans that interact in that, that structure they built sometimes it was, for me, it was, it's a really a mixed bag for me. You know? some of the most darkest things that happened to me happened at that orphanage <laugh>.

and, but some of the most brightest thing being, you know, Holt and the opportunity to get adopted, you know, happened as well. So at least I like most of my life experiences, I kind of gotta take the good and the bad together, you know? there, there was an awkward exchange when I fir when I saw Molly and, and she asked me if I went to a good family and I just reacted with kind of <laugh> an an affirmation without any vocalization kind of thing, you know, just like, Hmm, yeah. Kind of thing. You know, things worked out really well for me. That's I guess at the end of the day that's that's all I can kind of praise,

You know? And this is one of those things that a lot of it, I I, I really haven't unpacked and my wife like, or just like, you should probably unpack a lot of violence a lot of sexual violence with, from the older kids. And it's, it's one of those things I, I just don't think much about because I think I just kind of suppressed all that because it, it, it is, it is a lot of, a lot of pain associated with all those things and, and to happen when you have no faculties and no ability to, to process it on your own cuz you're so young. And, and then, so then you, all these things become kind of normalized. So you just think that's, these are, this is what life is or whatever, you know? And like, cuz you don't know anything other than that.

Yeah. And it's, it's, it struggles. And so I, part of the reason I think why I was so reticent to, to kind of go back and rebuild my own history and think through it and even go back to Korea was really, because I knew there were a lot of wounds unresolved wounds that that would unearth. And I just didn't know how it would make me feel, you know? And to the point where I was, I didn't think I'd ever get married or have children because I knew, like all those experiences were part of, part of who I, who I am. And, and like I really had a hard time with anger management when I was a kid. I would, I would get, get in fights a lot. it was just, you know, a way for me to, well, it just, it was just a carryover from the orphanage, like we would fight all the time kind of thing.

And that was kind of was the expectation. So I, I learned to be a good fighter kind of thing. And so I, I came to the States and went to Lilly White, new Hope suburb at the time and went to Middle Lake Ele Elementary School where I was one of maybe a handful of students of color there. And, and you know, the kids have an interesting honesty to them where, you know, when they get mad at you, they pick on the things that they know that are different about you. Right? And so they, they say things and then invariably like, I gotta throw hands and <laugh> do what I need to do, I guess. And, and then I end up in the principal's office. And that all, I think all that behavioral stuff that my adoptive parents really struggled with was kind of a carryover from the orphanage, you know? And even before that too, and we jumbo there was a lot of, lot of violence that there wasn't the, the sexual violence, but there was certainly physical violence.

Adapted Podcast:

Do you believe you were sexually abused? Yeah,

Eric Poole:

Absolutely. By,

Adapted Podcast:

By older kids?

Eric: Older kids, yeah.

Adapted Podcast: Do you think the the whole staff knew what was going on, but they didn't have enough staff for to stop it?

Eric Poole:

You know, I, I'm gonna give them the benefit of the doubt and say they didn't, but it was one of those things like, you just didn't, like you didn't talk about it, you know? It was, it was these things that would just kind of happen. yeah. And it was, yeah, it was, and I, I, I don't think I ever said anything to any of the hor cold staff that these things were happening. When you're on the receiving end of that, you kind of understand that this is wrong and there's a consequences of, of, you know, potentially saying something. It's, it's, and, and where it kind of, I remember, you know, all the scandals with the priests and, and then I would listen to the victims and they, no, you know, so many kids didn't say anything, you know, and one, it's like you're shame that it was happening to you.

And two, you know, in, in my case, I was too young to articulate what it was, and I didn't even know if I was supposed to say anything kind of thing, you know? And I, I, I just remember like thinking, thinking through that, that I kind of felt, felt the pains of the children who were being molested by the priests kind of thing. And, and in my case it was just older kids, you know? I I I can honestly say none of the, none of the adult staff was doing anything that I'm aware of. It was, at least not to me, you know,

Adapted Podcast:

You know, like, you know, you and I are both in our fifties, you know, thinking back to that now as you know, adults, that still has to be a failure of the, the people in charge. I mean, there wasn't adequate supervision.

Eric Poole:

Yeah, no, I, I, and, and when you ask me about, you know, what my feelings about, you know the whole family and I think that is the mixed bag, right? It's just like, I, maybe they should have known, I I think culturally they're, you know, it was a different place in time in the sixties and fifties, like, you know, more things were not said. and yeah, I don't, I, yeah, I mean, in hindsight, like if it was happening today, it would certainly need, you know, you need to make sure that there's more accountability for, for these kind of things and making sure it's, it's an open environment for children who are being abused to be able to speak up or at least have, have a way, you know? But Yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

Do you think, Eric, that kids instinctively felt like they shouldn't talk about it because they would be less adoptable? Do you think that was an element?

Eric Poole:

I don't know. I don't, okay. Yeah. For me, I don't think that was, that was,

Adapted Podcast:

It was just one more survival thing you had to, yeah.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. I think that's a good way to put it. Yep.

Adapted Podcast:

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be adopted?

Eric Poole:

No, I was elated, right? Excuse me. It was, do you remember,

Adapted Podcast:

Do you remember where you were and when you found out?

Eric Poole:

No, I just remember it's kind of like this, you know, when you're out on a beach and, and, and the wave starts coming towards you, like, you kind of know that you're gonna get hit kind of thing because I think the social workers are, they, they kind of change their change your day-to-day. Like now they're, they're, they're beginning to kind of groom you for, for the next transition, so to speak. Yeah. And so, so there was this deli more deliberate attempt to teach me the English language, right? And so there, there were like these changes that ha that would happen <laugh> in hopes yep. Of the transition because the kids, you know, there were kids who were getting adopted into non-English speaking countries in Europe, right? And so that's, so once they had kind of an idea that the process was going to move forward, like there was more intensive learning of English.

And so I kind of felt like that, you know, I, I used that wave analogy, like, it, it was kind of coming, so it was just the function of just like the wave hit you and you're like, oh, that's okay. And, and I think that's, so it happened gradually, but it, the change happened and I, I think I kind of knew, and I think everybody around me, all the other kids kind of knew I, for whatever reason, we were all keen to how this process works and, or, or worked. And, and when kids were just watching other kids transition, they started making sure they're groomed, go get their teeth fixed. I mean, there were all these like, hygienic things getting the immunization stuff with before they actually told you what was, what was gonna happen.

Adapted Podcast:

So it's almost like, I mean, this is probably what happened. There are more resources than applied to you.

Eric Poole:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. That's, that's a good way to put it. You know <laugh>, and I hate to say it like this, but you know, we, the two dogs that we, we we got there were foster dogs, you know, and, and they, I think it's kind of like the same thing with the Humane society and, and, you know, as, as they find homes, all of a sudden they're starting the process for, for transitioning the, the dogs <laugh>. Yeah. I I think it's very, it was very similar, right? And, and I think that's just the nature of the process. So it wasn't like there was a big coming out like, Hey, you're going to it. It was none of that. It was just kind of subtly, and then the news came and everybody's like, oh, okay. You know?

Adapted Podcast:

I can imagine also from the other kids that there's, there's a change that happens when they realize you, you'll be, you're one of the quote unquote lucky ones to leave.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. Yeah. No, and I do distinctly remember the, the days coming up to my departure, kind of the, the sadness and the appreciation, you know, kind of that the conflicting feelings that you have not only me, but from your friends you know, your fellow brother in that, that was at the orphanage. yeah. There was a lot of, lot of kind of acknowledgement and, and yeah, not, I mean, I, I haven't thought about th this thing in years, but I, yeah, there was an element of just being sad about leaving, you know? Yeah. That's a, that's, that's weird cuz I, I really haven't thought about this in a long time, and I, I appreciate you asking that question. It's, it, it almost makes me emotional kind of thinking about it because, and these were human beings that were so instrumental in my life that I'll, I've never seen since then, you know? Yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

Do you wonder what's happened to some of those kids that you knew?

Eric Poole:

I do. I do. Yeah. so when I went back Molly Holt had told me a couple of the stories and one of the, I think his, his Korean name was Kim Jeffries. he was, he was adopted to a family in Denmark, and I guess he became kind of a national soccer star played on their national team. And I remember her telling me that about one of my, one of my roommates couple kids were adopted to Sweden, I believe. yeah. And then it was one that was adopted into Minnesota.

So think about it kind of this way. so there, there, there was an element of celebration in terms of how I felt about coming to America is that, oh, I'm finally going home, right? and up to that point, you know, and, and many of us thought America was black because we interacted with more black Americans. we didn't really differentiate white people from black people either, kind of thing. Like there were Koreans and then there were Americans and Americans came in different shades, and Koreans all looked the same, you know, came in this homogeneous kind of thing. So I just, I remember thinking like when I got adopted into the family, I knew that it was a white family that was adopting me, which again, I, I didn't really like, it wasn't like, oh, dang, you know, like, this is when Milton Washington and I talk about this, like, he got adopted into a Black family.

and his experience was very different than my experience and having adopted into a white family. So then my struggle was going to a I went like maybe upper middle class white, suburban Minnesota, and not only am I adopting trying to adapt culturally linguistically, and then there was this like, I mean, I don't know if you look at me, I don't, I, I never, like when I was a kid, I had a big afro kind of kinky hair. by the time I, I, as I got older, my hair just kept curling up and, and no one actually viewed me as, as being Korean, right? They were always like, you know, there's so many mixed race black kids here in Minnesota that they just assumed I was just a light-skinned black kid, you know? and the funny, one of the funny stories that, that was shared with me was on on the day not necessarily the day of my adoption, but relatively close to the day that I showed up.

one of the grandparents was I guess just observing me playing on the floor. And, and the thing that he said was was, I don't think that boy's Korean, I think he's a pickin, like use the term piconi to describe me, which obviously that's another really anachronistic word, word for black children pejorative. And so that was kind of, so the mixed bag, I think for me. And, and, and now I'm, I'm an adult and I've, I've been able to kind of process some of this, like looking back at it. so when you adopt a child especially child with very little known origins that the, the child may come with a lot of baggage, right? And I was one of those kids that came, came with a lot of baggage. And, and as, as you live the baggages start unpacking there really wasn't a structure or a mechanism to help me unpack unpack a lot of my baggage, the violent tendencies and whatnot.

And so oftentimes the answer was, the resolution was to be punitive. So I got punished a lot for, for different things that I, I would do. And it wasn't a great environment for me to kind of mature and adjust. And so, yeah, and, and I think kind of much like, much like Holt the family that adopted me, it, they, you know, their heart was in the right place, right? I think you and I were talking about this altruism and charity piece. It was, it was a very charitable act for them to do. And, and at the end of the day at the end of it all, they, they have a child that they have to raise and, and become their parent. And I don't know whether they didn't think through that or it, it, it was way more than they can handle.

So they had adopted two full Korean siblings before me. They were, they were a few years older, I think seven years older. and that kind of fell apart. And so as I was coming into, into this that the relationship was starting to disintegrate, and then they had fostered a Ethiopian boy at the time that were kind of the same age as the older Korean girls they ended up shipping him out of the house. And the problem was, and the thing that they weren't, they didn't realize was that my connection to the family, like he was my closest connection to the family. and he was a refugee from Ethiopia through their civil war. he came to Minnesota because he needed open heart surgery. And so they took him on and they really thought he was a bad influence on me.

and I don't, I don't know, understand the details of it. I think, I think part of it was there was a lot of kind of very pro-black kind of or like maybe black nationalist kind of ethos that he was like teaching me that, that that was a problem. Like and I, I just remember him teaching me how to pick my hair out to make my Afro as big as I can make it, you know with the huge metal pick and we're picking our hair out and, and he and I would just, yeah, it was, and he was my big brother for all intents and purposes. And, and I think they felt like this was, wasn't gonna go, go down to a place where I ended up in a place where they, they wanted me to be kind.

Adapted Podcast:

Thanks so much, Eric, for coming forward and part two of his story will be out in two weeks. Thanks also to Jay Gin for our theme music. You can find him at jaejinmusic.com. Thank you to our Patreon supporters who help pay to sustain this podcast. A special thanks goes to volunteer Yugeun Jeon, who is giving up many weekend hours to translate some episodes from season five and season six into Korean. That's it for now. Take care.