

Jena Heath: How old were you when you came home from China? Do you have any memory at all of China?

Lily Selvaggi: I was fourteen months when I was adopted. The only memory I have of China is watching videos of me in China. I found them one time at my grandma's house. I said, "Is that what I think it is? I'll watch it," because there's nothing good on TV.

Jena: How old were you when you found them?

Lily: Older than five because I was in school, less than ten. Six, seven, eight, one of those years.

Jena: What was it like when you were watching them? Was it weird? Did it feel weird? Was it cool? How did it feel?

Lily: It was shaky cam because I think mom was recording it. I didn't see a lot of it. It was interesting to think that I was watching myself from a long time ago, but I was still here in today. So much had happened since then.

Jena: In a way did it feel like you were watching another person, not yourself?

Lily: Yeah. I didn't really make the connection that it was me. I could see it was me. I had no memories. I couldn't verify that that was my experience.

Jena: What do you know about your birth or biological family in China? Do you have any information at all?

Lily: I do not know anything about my biological family other than I probably have brothers and sisters out there. I did get to meet my foster family. She was very nice. It was a weird situation though because her husband had just died earlier that month. Everyone was a little thrown off balance.

Jena: This was when you went on your heritage tour when you were ten? That's when you met her. She still wanted to meet you even though she had just lost her husband? What was that like?

Lily: As a ten-year-old, I didn't truly get all of it. I really wanted to spend more time with the other girls. I was sad as to why we were separating. Once I was gone with them for a while, I started, "Oh, wait. This actually might be kind of important if I sit down and think about it." It's kind of like that feeling you have when you go over to your friend's house and want to impress their parents. You don't want to do anything to upset them, so you end up upsetting them because you're too awkward. You're just, "I don't want to offend you at all, so I'll just sit here and act really nice and polite."

Jena: For her, it felt like this big reunion. For you, she's a stranger. You're just trying to be on your best behavior, especially knowing she had just lost her husband. She has her expectations, and you're just this ten-year-old kid.

Lily: We went to a restaurant in the town. We had a traditional meal. I think I remember. One of the plates to eat was a chicken, but specific part of the chicken. It was the head with the comb. Somehow, I tried part of the comb.

Jena: Do you remember what that tasted like? How was that?

Lily: Rubbery. It didn't really taste like anything.

Jena: What is like not knowing about your birth family? Is that something over the years that you have given much thought to, a little, a lot, medium? How has that evolved as you've gotten older, thinking about it?

Lily: It hasn't affected me much. I've thought about it. I can't spin what-ifs because there's unlimited what-ifs. I remember reading a book. It was a YA dystopian novel. The main character was adopted. He had a friend whose sister always thought that if she was adopted maybe her family would be Queens or Kings. It was some big story where it was a murder attempt. They'd have to give up their child for safety. [laughs] No, I don't think about that very much.

Jena: It sounds like in your mind if you give a lot of thought, it's not like you can really ever come to a conclusion. Is that it?

Lily: Yeah. I'm logical in that standpoint. There's not enough evidence in any way. I would like to meet them. That would be very cool. If I'm super bored, I'll start thinking about it. I'd actually be more interested to meet brothers and sisters than ponder about the possibility of what my biological family was like.

Jena: Why are you more interested in brothers and sisters? What about that is appealing to you?

Lily: I've always wanted a brother or sister. I do have a sister. My biological parents did have a daughter. We have a fourteen years difference. I basically feel like an only child. There's perks to that. You want someone to be with.

Jena: My daughter is nine. Her older siblings, my stepkids, are twenty-one and twenty-five. You have a sister and brother, but...

Lily: It's more like the weird aunt.

Jena: Right. I hear ya. [laughs] Are there a lot of Asian kids in your school?

Lily: No. There's like four. Two of them are Indian, not Chinese/Taiwanese/Japanese Asian.

Jena: Is there any other Chinese kid your school?

Lily: I don't think so. There's a Taiwanese kid.

Jena: How big is your school? How many kids roughly?

Lily: My school's a 3A. There's around a hundred kids in each grade. My class is pretty big. We have 120 kids before they all drop out.

Jena: How many grades?

Lily: Four grades.

Jena: So about four or five hundred kids in your school, and you're the only Chinese kid. What's that like?

Lily: I don't think much about it. I was raised by Caucasian parents. I'm basically a white girl. I do travel. I don't really know many Chinese heritage or traditions.

Jena: You don't necessarily identify first as Chinese? It sounds like you identify as, "I'm Chinese American." Is that fair to say? I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Lily: Definitely fair to say. I can't speak Chinese. I wish I could. I don't know very many cultural traditions. I don't have a strong connection to that part. You guys coming over has actually made me more interested in it. I feel a little guilty too for not looking in more.

Jena: Why do you feel guilty?

Lily: Because it's something that not everyone has. You should take advantage of what you were born with. It's a different perspective that you have a first-class ticket to. You shouldn't waste that.

Jena: A first-class ticket to some understanding of China and Chinese heritage? Do you think maybe later when you're older and you've got more time in your life, would you like to go back to China or learn more about it?

Lily: Yeah, not only as a heritage thing. I enjoy travelling a lot. Going anywhere would be cool. It'd be cool to go back when I'm older because then you have more experience under your belt. You might know more things. You might be able to compare more things.

Jena: You might have more ability to understand and put things into context. Do other kids ever, in the course of your growing up, call attention to the fact that you're Chinese? You're living your life. "I got my white parents. I'm Chinese America. I don't even really think about

being Chinese. This is just who I am. I'm Lily." Have you ever had situations where other kids call attention to the fact that you're Chinese? What has that been like? How do you handle it?

Lily: I know when I was in elementary school people would be surprised that I was adopted. Looking back on it, I can give them that. Then I was thinking, "No, I've always been adopted. How could you not know this?" A funny rendition of this, I was playing volleyball in a game. The students were in the stands cheering me on, cheering the team on. I got a good dig out of a hit from the net. One of the students in the crowd was saying, "Who's that girl? What's her name?" They said Lily. He misunderstood, so he called me Ling Ling. That got passed around. I was like, "Whatever, can't really do anything." He didn't mean it in a bad way. Then a good friend of mine heard about it, Tatiana, she's African American. Now she's taken it upon herself to call me Ling Ling.

My friends are all divided about this. Some of them are saying, "It's okay. She doesn't mean it in a bad way." Other friends are saying, "No. That's racist. You can't do that." At first, I didn't know how I felt about this. I wasn't offended about it. I wasn't sure if it was persisting the Chinese stereotype of names. I thought about it for a little while and sat on it. I came to the conclusion that it's how you say it. She means it as a sign of affection. She calls me out. I know it's her too. She'll usually say, "Hey, Ling Ling. Come over here. Can I have your food?"

Jena: Your feeling is that she doesn't mean any offense by it. It's an affectionate thing. Have you ever talked to her about it?

Lily: In the beginning I asked her, "Why do you call me that?" She's like, "Why not?" She's a spur-the-moment type person.

Jena: It sounds like some of your friends felt protective for you. This person is giving you this name. They're not even asking you what you think. They had your back about it.

Lily: It's fine for those friends to do it. I'm thankful for them to protect me about it. It's funny actually now. She won't let anyone else call me it. In a way, I got more protection.

Jena: If you thought that it wasn't affectionate, not from her but from anyone, how do you think you'd handle it?

Lily: If someone called it to be negatory, I'd just look at them and walk away. I'm lucky. In my school I got in with the popular volleyball type girls. I'm also a band nerd. I'm split on both levels of the social standing in high school. I'm in the good middle area where no one will do that to me because I have attachments to other people. I know some people don't like me. If someone were to do that, it's like what Tat was saying is that some people are racist toward black people. You laugh it off and you walk away. You don't let it hurt you. It does the persist the stereotyping part of it though.

Jena: It sounds like your way of thinking about this is that it's their problem, not your problem. Let it roll. If they're ignorant about things like this, why take it on?

Lily: That's the way you have to be in high school, to let the insults roll off. If you show that you're affected by it, people will find out that that's a way to affect you. They'll keep doing it. Letting it roll's not necessarily the best. It'll help you in high school, but it doesn't help the overall problem. Then people will find other people to do it on that might get affected by it. It doesn't stop it. It stops it from happening to you, but it doesn't stop it to happening from everyone.

Jena: It sounds like you really have thought about this, your role in terms of protecting yourself but then the larger implication of if you don't speak up, is this perpetuated for other people? It sounds like you're trying to find your place in all of that and that you feel good that you have your posy in high school. You have a social context that you fit into to.

Lily: I'm glad I do have my friends who take me besides the class. When you look at someone you don't see them for what you might have heard from other people. You see them for what you remember the memories from. Our school is a mixed bunch. Most of my friends are Mexican. They're black. They're white too. Racism is still a thing at our school. Within my friends, it's not. If you're racist, you have a closed mind.

Jena: We're almost done. I know it's hot. Your mom mentioned that you've gone to Korea a few times and worked with orphan children in Korea who have developmental disabilities and delays. Also, your mom mentioned that she, herself, is adopted. I'm wondering if those two things, how they affect or if they do impact your own thinking about being an adopted person.

Lily: Going to Korea didn't affect me as being adopted. I don't really identify with them. Going to Korea was more like, "You get to go to Korea. Then you get to help other people, which is cool." That was pretty cool. Mom being adopted, it's like what her parents told her. I've always known I was adopted. It's not treated as a bad thing. It's more of an exotic thing. This is an excuse to travel. Mom's adoption was different. Her parents were Caucasian, so it was less obvious that she was adopted. That doesn't change a lot for me. I still see myself as a Chinese American.

Jena: Her adoption is an adoption, but it's not the same as yours. It's just another fact of life about your family.

Lily: My adoption hasn't really -- I forget about it sometimes because it doesn't affect my daily life very much. It's just something of, to be cliché here, it's something of who I am. It's not anything bad or good. It's always been history.

Jena: If you could tell other kids or adults something, if you could offer them advice about how to talk about or think about -- you have this opportunity to correct any missteps that

other people may make, or maybe younger kids, younger adoptees coming along from China, is there anything you'd like to impart from your own experiences?

Lily: Try to figure out what you enjoy doing. Try not to regret too much. It's kind of my thing. I ask myself would I rather be guilty of something, or would I rather regret something? I try not to regret anything.

Jena: What do you mean? Like what?

Lily: I haven't had much of that psychological drama recently. I can use a basic kindergarten example. I was in kindergarten. We were reading "Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet, eating her curds and whey." Part of the activity was do you want to eat curds and whey? I figured out then, after this happens, which one would hurt me worse, being glad I eaten it, or eating it and hating it, or not eating it and always wondering, "What if?" I decided the what-if would bother me more, so I ate it. It was nasty. I don't like curds and whey.

Jena: Your life advice is "Go for it."

Lily: Go for it. I'm impulsive. I'm also logical. I make lots of lists. I don't always check everything off the list. I make a list. I keep the list in the back of my mind, gets jumbled around with everything else, the experiences, the memories. Then I make my decision off of that.