

Jena Heath: Tell me about what you know about your story. What's the story that you've been told over the years about how you came to be in your family?

Lily Morris: I was born in Guilin, China. I was found at this hospital for snake bites. I didn't have a snake bite. I was just there. A police officer found me and took me to an orphanage. Then I stayed with my foster parents until I was eleven months old. That's when my mom flew all the way to China with my aunt and their travel group. They adopted me. My mom waited thirteen months to get the referral. December 10<sup>th</sup> was my gotcha day. It was a little bit before my first birthday when they got me.

Jena: Do you have any memory of when you first knew this story? Growing up, did you ask about it? Did it occur to you at some point, "I don't really look like my mom?" Was it naturally part of the discussion in your family?

Lily: I've always known that I'm adopted. My mom would always tell me the story of how she flew to China and got me. I don't think when I was younger I realized that I looked different than my mom, or that all my friends looked like their parents and I didn't. I don't think I ever realized that as a little kid. When I got to seventh grade, that's when I started realizing that people were kind of alarmed that my mom was white. [laughs] In kindergarten through sixth grade I stayed at the same elementary school with the same kids. My mom was in the PTA and stuff. She always helps out in the classrooms. Everyone knew her as my mom. No one questioned me or mom about it. When I got to junior high and I made some new friends and they started coming over to my house, I wouldn't even think about telling them that I was adopted. They would be a little taken aback to see some Caucasian woman in my house. I realized that I should probably warn them or tell them that I was adopted, not that it really mattered to my new friends. They should accept me for who I am because they're my friends.

Jena: What was that like for you to become aware of the fact that this is something you probably needed to prepare them for? Did it bother you at all? Did it make you feel weird? Was it just like, "I'll just tell them. Then we won't really have to deal with their reaction?"

Lily: It was kind of weird because I wasn't used to people being confused that my mom wasn't the same race as me and also that I don't have a dad. People would also be confused about that. A couple times people would ask me if my dad was Chinese and that he lives in China. I would be like, "No. I don't have a dad."

Jena: When they would ask you, what would happen? Would they come over and go, "Whoa. Who's that lady?" Then you'd explain it? Did they seem nervous about asking you? Did they come right out and ask you?

Lily: People are kind of nervous about asking me stuff like that nowadays. A couple days ago one of my friends that I've known for a long time asked me if I've known my entire life that I was adopted or that one day my mom had to break it to me. She was weary about the subject. She was worried that she would hurt my feelings. I was like, "I've always known." I

was a little bit surprised that she would think that I would be uncomfortable with the subject. I've lived my life for fifteen years. I've heard a lot of things about adoption that's been said to me already. I've learned to toughen up a little bit about everything.

Jena: Tell me if I've got this right or if I don't have it right. It sounds like being asked the questions isn't so bothersome, it's the presumption on the part of the other person that for some reason you would feel uncomfortable. That's what's weird. Why would you feel uncomfortable talking about something that's natural for you?

Lily: That's how it is. I know that they don't want to offend me by asking questions. If they have a question, they should just say it and not be worried that I would feel uncomfortable. I wouldn't be.

Jena: How do you handle the dad question?

Lily: I tell them that my mom's a single mom. I tell them that I don't have a dad. Then they'll be like, "Well, you do have a dad somewhere." I'm like, "Yeah, but still that's not what you were asking."

Jena: Do you give much thought or over the years have you given much thought to your biological parents? Do you wonder about them at all? I'll give you my daughter's measure: a lot, medium, a little?

Lily: In between medium and a lot. In seventh grade my mom and I and my aunt, we did the biological parent search. We contacted...

Barb Morris: A woman in Guilin.

Jena: Shee-Shee, who does searching for families in Guilin.

Lily: We sent in a bunch of pictures of myself throughout the years. She put it together into a poster and wrote stuff in Chinese on it that was like, "If you see anyone who looks like this girl, contact this number," or something. She put a bunch of the posters up around my province. Then she interviewed some local people there. There was no luck with finding anyone.

Jena: How old were you when you did this?

Lily: I was thirteen or fourteen.

Jena: It wasn't successful, at least at this point. How did you feel? Were you really hoping? Did you have mixed feelings? What was it like when you couldn't get an answer?

Lily: I was disappointed. I was really hoping that I would find my birth parents. I still do hope that I find them someday. I just don't know when or how. We already tried to find them, and it was unsuccessful.

Jena: I can see that it's important to you. Can you tell me a little bit about why? What is it that feels so deep about finding your birth parents?

Lily: They gave birth to me. [laughs] I've always wondered. I want to find someone who looks like me [emotional] and maybe ask them why they gave me up.

Jena: It makes you sad to think about them giving you up. Do you know about the one-child policy and about the circumstances for so many families? I know it seems like a weird question. Does it help at all to have that context?

Lily: Kind of. I understand that they might have had to give me up, but still. There's a lot of questions about them and stuff that I want to know the answers to. I can't ask them until I find them. I don't know if that will happen. I want it to. [crying]

Jena: Is this something you've always felt so deeply? Has it grown or changed as you've gotten older?

Lily: I've always wanted to find them. It's probably developed more of a deeper meaning as I got older. After I found out that the search was unsuccessful, that made me want to find them more.

Jena: How did you decide to search? Was this something you asked your mom to do? Was this something that she suggested? How did the idea start?

Lily: I watched this documentary called *Somewhere Between*. That's about other Chinese adoptees. One of them found their biological parents. I watched that with my mom. I was like, "Mom, we should try to find my biological parents." That's how.

Jena: Had you thought about it very much before you saw the documentary?

Lily: Not really, actually.

Jena: Do you think you'll try again as you get older? You know, there are all sorts of things going on about searching. I don't know whether you feel like it's something that will never happen. Is it a closed book? Do you still have some hope?

Lily: I will probably still try to find them. I don't want to give up yet.

Jena: Aside from the why, what are other questions you would like to ask them?

Lily: I want to find out if I have any other siblings. I just want to see them.

Jena: What was it like going through this with your mom? Could you talk openly with your mom about your feelings about the search? Was it something you felt like you shared together? Did you have any concerns or fears that your mom might feel bad about your desire to find your birth parents?

Lily: I think we talked openly about it. I don't think she had any concerns about me wanting to find them. She understood that it was a part of me that I wanted to have some closure on, if that makes sense, to find them.

Jena: It makes perfect. It makes total sense. If you did find them, what would you say to them?

Lily: Ni hao.

[laughter]

Jena: That's a very good start. You learned some Mandarin, who are you kidding? Have you been back to China yet?

Lily: Yeah. In fourth grade we went back on this heritage tour. I got to visit my province and then my orphanage. I met my foster parents again. That was a good experience. Then in fifth grade we went back again to adopt my little cousin. That was also another good experience.

Jena: Your cousin is five now?

Lily: Yes. It was really cool to see how -- you said before, I went through the process both ways. The first way I was being adopted. The second time I was seeing it from a person who was adopting someone's perspective.

Jena: How is it to have another person in the family who's Chinese? Did that help at all with the feeling of having someone who looks like you? You were talking about siblings before and the idea of would there be someone who looked like me? Does it help to have a cousin, who is adopted, not a birth cousin? Does it make no difference in that sense?

Lily: It's cool that two people in this family were adopted. As having a sibling that looks like me, doesn't really make a difference. That would be saying all Asian people look the same. I want to find someone who's biologically related to me. When we got Kate it was also a new adjustment because she was my first girl cousin. Since she was so little, I can't really relate to her about adopting stuff yet because the age difference is so large.

Jena: You're going to be someone she, I would imagine, she can look up to and ask questions of when she's older. She's young. I can understand. You can't have any real conversations except about Legos or something.

Lily: When I was saying before there's other Chinese adoptees who go to my school, I don't really talk to them about being adopted. If I wanted to, I probably could. It might be a little weird. They'd probably be able to relate to a lot of the stuff I said before.

Jena: Do you talk to anyone about it, any other peer?

Lily: Not really. From time to time I'll mention if my friend has a sister, I'll be like, "I wish I had a sister because I'm an only child." They'd be like, "You probably do somewhere in the world." I'm like, "Yeah, but that's not what I was saying."

Jena: In a way, it sounds like those kind of comments actually make you feel isolated.

Lily: Yeah, kind of.

Jena: Unintentionally.

Lily: Yeah. If I don't think about it that much, it doesn't bother me as much.

Jena: How do you think you'll manage with this as you continue on through your teenage years and older? That may not be a fair question. It's clearly very, very deep for you, very important. You've been crying when you talk about it. As you said, do you stay busy and push it away? It seems like something that's a very heavy feeling for you. I wonder how you manage it.

Lily: I don't spend that much time thinking this deeply about it all the time. Since I'm in so many different sports in school, I don't have that much time to dwell on the fact that I'm adopted and think about that for long periods of time. It's always there in the back of my mind. Whenever I go out in public, sometimes people give us looks because I don't look like my mom. We're an interesting looking family on the outside. I don't give it too much thought. When I do, I realize it means a lot to me.

Jena: This may be a very odd and unfair question. I'm curious. If you could look like your mom, if it were possible to wave a magic wand and have everyone in the family look similar, is that something you would want?

Lily: I don't know. It would be a different life. I don't know. I don't think so. I like who I am right now. I don't think I would change myself at this point in my life. It would be more convenient to look like my mom, but I don't think I would.

Jena: It's more a question of how you move through the world and deal with other people's responses and reactions, even the unspoken ones?

Lily: Yeah. I'm proud of who I am. Being adopted is a part of me that I have to live with. I have to accept it. I don't know if I would say I wouldn't change it. At this point, I wouldn't. I

have a great family right now. They're pretty cool people. They love and support whatever I do even if I don't want them there. [laughs] I don't think I would change anything.

Jena: You've chosen to have this discussion with them here, with your mother and your aunt, a very honest, difficult conversation. We could've gone off privately. It seems like you're comfortable at least being able to share these feelings about your birth parents.

Lily: Yeah. They wanted to be here also. I don't really mind talking openly about this, with them at least.

Jena: Is there something that I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about or put out there in the world? Is there something that you wish people knew about being adopted, being Chinese, having a single mom?

Lily: Like you said before, I don't think anyone who's adopted and who is Chinese likes the stereotype of if you're Chinese you have to speak Mandarin, which you don't. Also, I don't like the stereotype since I'm Chinese I have to be smart. I think I'm pretty smart. It's always there. People who are my peers expect me to always be the best at math and the best at every subject just because I'm Asian. It's hard. You want to live up to that because it's a good stereotype. Still, it's not realistic. It's very generalized. I don't like it.

Jena: It's still a stereotype, good or bad. It's interesting that you feel it so overtly. Do you ever feel it from teachers?

Lily: Maybe. Maybe not towards me in particular, but to other Asian students. Sometimes it's subtly obvious that they have higher expectations for Asian students rather than white students.