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On May 31, 2013, I was the closest I had been to my birth mother since I was separated from her at birth. This homecoming wasn't as joyous as the reunion stories Korea's network station, KBS, likes to air. There were no hugs. Instead, there she was, just her name and address, sitting next to me in a filing folder on a conference table.

That day, my eyes wouldn't leave that pale yellow folder. Finally, I heard the social worker repeat that they had been unsuccessful at reaching my birth mother through a "telegram." She said she couldn't think of other options, then turned to ask me, "How do you suggest we contact your birth mother?"

I snapped back "Why don't you just go in- person down to where she' is from?" She laughed it off, saying that they were understaffed. When the meeting ended, I walked out of the room fighting the tears. It was impossible not to break down after three years of looking for a blood relative had resulted in an emotionally devastating situation that was not uncommon, as I would soon come to discover.

In August 2010, I upended my comfortable life in San Francisco and moved to Seoul, South Korea to explore a culture I had left at three months old. Upon moving to Korea, I needed to get a residence visa but that required verification that I was adopted. So I visited the adoption agency my parents had used to facilitate my adoption, Holt Children's Services, to get help. While there, I met with Esther Kim, my assigned post-adoption services social worker. She bombarded me with details about birth family searches. Bewildered, I agreed to start the process.

For eight months, I didn't hear from Esther. During that period, I sent her three emails with no response. I tried to put the situation in the back of my mind while I waited, but that proved impossible. I would often find myself at a bus stop watching middle-aged women walk by, wondering if one of them was my mother.

Esther finally emailed me to tell me they couldn't locate my birth mother. She wrote that it was common for women in the 80s to leave false identification numbers. She was sorry but wished me luck. I was frustrated but I believed her and decided to put the search behind me for the time being.

Most adoption agencies like Holt deny transparency for adoptees who want to view their birth records, claiming that paperwork was sloppy, lost, or incorrect. Since the end of the Korean War, 160,000-plus Korean children have been adopted. Presently, 2,000 each year are still sent abroad. That is indeed a significant number of adoptees' records to keep track of—except Korea is a country that prides itself on meticulous historical recordkeeping, including tracing the evolving lineages of families all the way back to the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897). When faced with the adoption agency's excuse, many adoptees lose hope and stop their search after the first attempt.

But I wasn't one of them. After meeting many other adoptees living in Korea, I realized adoption agencies were notorious for withholding information. One adoptee recommended that I check to see if I had missed anything from the first visit. So I went back to Holt in June 2012 to reopen my files. Esther now told me that they had found my birth mother, but she hadn't replied to their telegram so I shouldn't look at my files again. Skeptical of her new story, I left her office feeling nauseated. The following weeks, I was consumed with anxiety and lit a cigarette every time I thought about that day.

A prominent adoptee and activist, Jane Jeong Trenka, was outraged by the lack of post-adoption services in Korea. She, along with other activists, fought to ratify the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare's adoption laws. In 2011, the Special Adoption Act was amended. By August 2012, the amendment was being enforced. One of the two primary objectives of the amendment was to help adoptees trace their origin through the government-funded agency, Korean Adoptee Services (formerly K-Care). This meant the adoption agencies legally had to give, upon request, birth records to KAS. KAS would then spearhead the birth search.

Two years had passed between the start of my search and that law going into effect. That first week, I contacted KAS. I received an email back from the social worker reporting that Holt refused to give over my paperwork because they had already done their own search and it was unsuccessful. Once again, I felt backed into a corner by Holt, a multimillion-dollar organization that manipulated the Korean government and undermined the law.

An adoption agency can make up to \$50,000 USD for a single adoption; babies become commodities rather than human beings. The ethical lines become even more skewed when one starts wondering if the baby in question was freely given up for adoption by the birth parent or if the agency applied coercion. As a "company" whose major export is children, they must also protect and hide their suppliers. Therefore they do not want a successful reunion between child and mother.

A month later, in September 2012, KAS confirmed they had my paperwork and a matching name and identification number, following an arduous battle with Holt. I was elated. I started to tell my close adoptee friends that I had finally found my mother. After two years, everything was coming to fruition.

But several months passed and, although I tried to have no expectations, I couldn't help but visualize the moment in which I would finally meet my birth mother. Then all of a sudden, 2013 arrived. The KAS worker finally contacted me to say that they had sent a "telegram" to my birth mother but had received no response. I was reluctant to believe KAS and asked for her to send the signed telegram. She reluctantly sent it with a lot of the details whited out. Then communication between KAS and I ceased for three months.

Exasperated and tired of fighting alone, I met with Jane Jeong Trenka to discuss what to do next. I looked up to her as a fellow adoptee and trusted her knowledge of the laws. We decided to meet with KAS to question their role in the birth family search since no progress had been made. More importantly, we wanted a protocol

set up for searches moving forward. That day, May 31st, we visited KAS with two other adoptees and labored several hours over my birth file, debating how to contact my birth mother. I decided to tell the social worker I had discovered a lump in my breast in 2009. I hoped that telling her about a breast cancer scare could expedite the search for medical history.

The Special Adoption amendment includes a clause stating that if an adoptee has a life-threatening illness documented by a doctor, then the biological parent's information can be released. Cases have been reported of Korean-American adoptees dying while waiting for a matching bone marrow donor. But cases like these could be solved if an identifying family member could be found.

However, the KAS social worker said protecting the rights of the birth mother was of the utmost importance, emphasizing that most mothers were likely remarried with a family of their own. Korea is ranked 108th in the world in gender equality. Every day, Korean women are faced with sexual discrimination. Having a child out of wedlock is not only a stigma but leads to massive financial problems. The Korean government only issues a monthly allowance of 70,000 Korean won (\$64 USD), making it impossible to provide for a child. Adoption agencies tend to play up the cultural stigma and financial woes to prospective adoptive parents.

When I first visited Holt, Esther told me how poor my birth mother was and that I should be happy I had been raised in a wealthy country, America. I felt guilty and ashamed to be searching for a poor woman when I had enjoyed a comfortable childhood. Again, when the KAS social worker spoke about the rights of the birth mothers, I felt wrong for attempting to uproot a family. Feelings of guilt, shame, and depression are common among adoptees when searching for their personal histories. A recent study conducted at the University of Minnesota found that adopted adolescents were four times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-adopted peers.

2013 is coming to an end. I have met one more time with KAS and received one email. We spoke in circles about how KAS was proceeding with my search. They still don't have a plan of action for birth family searches for other adoptees. The exasperated social worker said the agency is very busy. Right now, their priority is fixing the state of current adoptions so Korea can join the Hague Convention, a global inter-governmental legal organization with an interest in child protection, so she is unable to focus on birth family searches. And I haven't heard from her in two months.

I no longer cry about this. I no longer get my hopes up. But every day, I ride the Seoul subway, I look around at an ajumma holding her daughter's hand or brushing her son's hair out of his face. I can't help but wish that that were my mother and me. While I know all reunion stories aren't happy, I can only continue to fight so that my fellow adoptees and I can have even the possibility of a reunion.