

## Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath

Adoptees reckon with corruption in orphanages, hidden birth certificates, and the urge to search for their birth parents.

By Larissa MacFarquhar

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Deanna Doss Shrodes photographed by Graeme Mitchell.

"In order to be adopted you first have to lose your entire family," Deanna Doss Shrodes says. Photographs by Graeme Mitchell for The New Yorker

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On August 1, 1966, a baby girl is born in Norfolk, Virginia. Her mother names her Melanie Lynn. She is placed in foster care for two months to make sure she has no medical issues. Then she is adopted by a couple who live a hundred miles away.

On a day in 1970, a baby girl is born in Incheon, South Korea, a port city just west of Seoul. Her mother names her Eun-hee. Eun-hee lives with her mother and her mother's parents in Incheon until she is three years old. When she is nearly six, she is sent to adoptive parents in America.

On September 18, 1985, a baby girl is born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her mother does not give her a name. The mother relinquishes her at birth to an adoption agency. The mother is asked if she wants to hold the baby and says no.

One evening in December, 2021, Deanna Doss Shrodes had come home from work. The TV was tuned to a news segment about the oral arguments at the Supreme Court for the case that challenged *Roe v. Wade*. Deanna is a pastor and a director of women's ministries at a Pentecostal church in Florida. She is opposed to abortion, and was glad that *Roe* might soon be overturned. But then Amy Coney Barrett asked about "safe haven" laws, which permit a mother who doesn't want to keep her baby to drop it off anonymously in a deposit box at a hospital or a fire station. Why, Barrett wanted to know, didn't safe-haven laws remove the burden that was allegedly being imposed upon a woman who couldn't obtain an abortion? The woman wouldn't be forced to be a parent, and the baby could be adopted. At this point, Deanna became so upset that she stopped listening.

Deanna is adopted, and she has spent much of her life grappling with the emotional consequences of that. She believes that a child who starts life in a box will never know who they are, unless they manage somehow to track down their anonymous parents. It distresses her that many of her fellow-Christians, such as Barrett, talk about adoption as the win-win solution to abortion, as though once a baby is adopted that is the end of the story. If someone says of Deanna that she was adopted, she corrects them and says that she is adopted. Being adopted is, to her, as to many adoptees, a profoundly different way of being human, one that affects almost everything about her life.

"I explain to friends that in order to be adopted you first have to lose your entire family," Deanna said. "And they'll say, Well, yes, but if it happens to a newborn what do they know? You were adopted, get over it. Would you tell your friend who lost their family in a car accident, Get over it? No. But as an adoptee you're expected to be over it because, O.K., that happened to you, but this wonderful thing also happened, and why can't you focus on the wonderful thing?"

There are disproportionate numbers of adoptees in psychiatric hospitals and addiction programs, given that they are only about two per cent of the population. A study found that adoptees attempt suicide at four times the rate of other people.

“A big thing that adoptees get frustrated by is when people say that adopting kids is no different,” Deanna said. “You know, if they say, I don’t feel any differently about my biological kids than my adopted kids, I’m just a mom, we’re just a family. That is not true.” How many parents tell their adopted children, I love you as if you were my own? And how many of those children wonder, Am I not your own?

One day, when she was very little, Deanna was playing hide-and-seek with her sister. She wriggled underneath her parents’ bed to hide, and in the darkness she felt something hard and cold, made of metal. She pulled it out from under the bed and saw that it was a box. She opened it, and found a piece of paper with her name on it. The language on the paper was confusing, but she understood that it said that Melanie Lynn Alley, born in 1966, had become Deanna Lynn Doss.

Melanie Lynn Alley was another person, but also, somehow, herself. Deanna already knew that she was adopted, but she hadn’t known that she’d had another name. Was Melanie Lynn Alley the person she would have become if her birth mother had kept her? It felt as though Melanie was a part of her, but a part that she couldn’t see, that existed next to her, or behind her, like the ghost of a twin.

“Some people have no issues at all with being an adoptee,” Deanna said. “They’re happy as a lark. They don’t feel the pain, for whatever reason. But there are others who haven’t come out of the fog, or they don’t think they’re in a fog, or whatever. And they join one of the adoptee groups and they go, What’s wrong with all you people? I’m so happy, I’m so grateful, I don’t see what you’re upset about. That will create an explosion of people going, Why are you even here? This is a support group, not a place to come and talk about how happy you are.”

“Coming out of the fog” means different things to different adoptees. It can mean realizing that the obscure, intermittent unhappiness or bewilderment you have felt since childhood is not a personality trait but something shared by others who are adopted. It can mean realizing that you were a good, hardworking child partly out of a need to prove that your parents were right to choose you, or a sense that it was your job to make your parents happy, or a fear that if you weren’t good your parents would give you away, like the first ones did. It can mean coming to feel that not knowing anything about the people whose bodies made yours is strange and disturbing. It can mean seeing that you and your parents were brought together not only by choice or Providence but by a vast, powerful, opaque system with its own history and purposes. Those who have come out of the fog say that doing so is not just disorienting but painful, and many think back longingly to the time before they had such thoughts.

Some adoptees dislike the idea of the fog, because it suggests that an adoptee who doesn’t feel the way that out-of-the-fog adoptees do must be deluded. And it’s true; many out-of-the-fog adoptees do believe that. They point out that a person can feel fine about their adoption for most of their life and then some event—pregnancy, the death of a parent—will reveal to them that they were not fine at all. But there are many others who reject this—who aren’t interested in searching for their birth parents, and think about their adoption only rarely in the course of their life.

Although she found her birth mother decades ago, Deanna feels she came out of the fog more recently, because she hadn't realized how many other adoptees were going through the same things she was. She and her husband had gone to see a movie about a girl who finds out that she is adopted at the age of nineteen. Deanna wept with fury during the movie, and when she discovered afterward that her husband didn't understand what she was crying about, despite having been married to her since she was twenty years old, she went online and discovered that there were dozens, maybe hundreds, of Web sites on which adoptees were talking to each other.

It was a wild ferment of rage and pain, support groups and manifestos. Some adoptees were posting about lies and secrets: altered documents and birth dates; paperwork they'd been told was lost in a fire or a flood (so many fires and floods); birth parents they'd been told were dead but weren't; things they'd been told about their past that the person who told them couldn't possibly know. Others were arguing about whether there was such a thing as a primal wound—whether a baby bonded in utero with its mother and felt abandoned if it were given up, even if it were handed over in the delivery room. Some had found their birth parents and were in the middle of whatever that was; some were still searching and needed advice about DNA or genealogy; many were waiting to search until their adoptive parents died, for fear of hurting them. They were looking for pieces of their lives or their selves that were missing, or had been falsified or renamed, trying to fit them to the pieces they had.

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There isn't a single adoptee movement—the community is too heterogeneous for that. There is the older generation, the so-called Baby Scoop Era adoptees, such as Deanna—the mostly white children of the four million or so unmarried women who gave babies up for adoption between the end of the Second World War and the passing of *Roe v. Wade*. Many of those adoptions were forced, and almost all were closed—the identities of the birth parents and the adoptive names of their children were kept secret, making it very difficult for the parents and the children to find one another. There is the youngest generation, some of whom have open adoptions and have always known their birth parents, posting on adoptee TikTok. For some reason, it seems the vast majority of adoptees in the forums online are women.

One thing almost everyone agrees on is that adult adoptees should have the unrestricted right to see their original birth certificates, rather than only the “amended” ones with the names of their adoptive parents (but this is the law in only a dozen states). Many adoptees condemn international adoption, which cuts children off from their native cultures more drastically than any other kind and makes it unlikely that they will ever find, much less know, their birth parents. (Rates of international adoption by Americans have plummeted in recent years, down ninety-three per cent since 2004.) Some adoptees want to end adoption altogether, although most believe that there are situations in which it is the best option. More want to end transracial adoption—to return adoption, in some ways, to its modern beginnings.

A hundred years ago, adoption agencies tried to match children and parents so precisely that they could pass as a biological family. If parents wished to keep the adoption a secret, from the child or from the world, they could plausibly do it. Then, in the nineteen-fifties, some agencies set about persuading white parents to adopt children of color, with campaigns such as “Operation Brown Baby.” The campaigns were successful—by the start of this decade, nearly three-quarters of adoptees of color were adopted into white families. Four generations of

parents loved children of races different from their own. In much of the adoption world, whose foundational premise is that love is stronger than biology, color-blindness still seemed like a precious and viable ideal. But then the adopted children grew up and some of them—though by no means all—believed that love was not enough.

Many adoptees feel that the way we understand adoption has been dominated by the perspectives of adoptive parents. Birth parents are less often heard from, though almost anyone can understand the grief of a parent who gives up a child for adoption (one study found more than ninety per cent of those who are denied an abortion keep their child rather than give it up). But understanding how adoption can affect an adoptee is more difficult, because adoptees, and the various kinds of adoptions, are so different from one another.

You can divide adoption into three main categories: plausibly invisible adoptions, such as Deanna's, in which a child is adopted by parents of the same race; transracial adoptions; and international adoptions. Each of these has its own complexities and problems, and each is now going through a new reckoning.

Joy Lieberthal grew up just outside New York City; she had three younger sisters, all adopted from Korea, like herself. Her father was Jewish, her mother Catholic; Joy and her sisters were raised Catholic. When Joy first met her parents, she spoke no English, but she went straight into first grade and learned the language in three months. Once she spoke English, her mother would tell her stories about how Joy had behaved when she first arrived from Korea—how, when her father came home from work, she ran to pull off his jacket and shoes and take his briefcase and sit him down and give him a massage and sing for him. How, when her mother was mopping the kitchen floor, Joy gestured for her to stop, that she would do it—she ran to fetch a rag and scrubbed the floor on her knees until it was so clean you could eat off it, then wrung out the cloth so thoroughly that when she was done the cloth was dry.

Joy's earliest memory was of leaving her mother's parents' house in Korea. She remembered being in the back seat of a car, banging on the window and crying, as somebody in the car rolled the window up. She could see her grandparents standing outside their house, also crying, waving goodbye. She knew that later she had lived in an orphanage for a year and a half, but she didn't remember it well. She remembered that it had been cold—it was in the mountains. She remembered a river where she had washed her clothes and cleaned rice. She could picture the room she had slept in, with sunlight coming in.

Because Joy was nearly six by the time she left for America, she remembered the journey. First she had been taken from the orphanage to stay for a few months in a Buddhist temple in Seoul, where nuns had trained her for her new life. They taught her how to greet her American father at the door, how to give massages, how to wash clothes and floors, how to take care of younger children, how to sing for adults. She didn't know what her life in America was going to be like, and it seemed that the nuns didn't know, either, so they prepared her for whatever might happen.

On the day she was to leave for America, she wore a floral dress with a peacock on it. She was given a bag that contained a pair of pajamas, a pair of shoes, a notebook, a photo album that her American parents had sent her with pictures of themselves, and a gift that she was to present to her parents when she met them. The gift was a white box containing a little drawstring coin bag made of rainbow-striped saekdong silk. There were a few other Korean kids

who were on the same flight, including a little girl who would become her younger sister. One of the adults with them at the airport told her to be good, to honor her parents, and to make Korea proud.

She and the other kids walked out onto the tarmac and the plane's engine was going and it was incredibly loud. She hated loud noises, and she covered her ears and started to cry. On the plane, her ears hurt from the pressure, and she threw up on herself, then threw up again, and her nose started to bleed. The flight to J.F.K. was twenty-six hours long, with a layover in Anchorage. She didn't remember arriving in New York, but she had seen a photo her parents took when she got off the plane, her peacock dress torn, a bloody Kleenex sticking out of her nose, her hair crooked. Her new parents were scary. They had blue eyes—she had never seen blue eyes. Her new sister ran away in the airport and everyone was busy trying to catch her.

She didn't remember the car ride back to her parents' house, but she remembered waking up when they got there, and getting out of the car carrying a string of lollipops and a new doll. She and her sister were led up the stairs, and at the top was their bedroom—yellow, with patchwork bedspreads. She took off her clothes and her sister's clothes and folded them and helped her sister to put on her pajamas. They had never slept in a bed before and kept falling off, but they slept for a long time.

Her Korean name was listed as Kim Young-ja on the paperwork her parents were given, but they named her Joy. In fact, Kim Young-ja was not Joy's original name, either—her name was Song Eun-hee. What had happened, as Joy understood it later, was that the director of the orphanage had originally promised Joy's parents a different girl, but had been unable to deliver her. Not wanting to lose the customers, the director said that by great good fortune she had found a second girl with the same name and birth date as the first, so Joy came to her parents with falsified documents.

Name of the child: Kim, Young-Ja

Sex: Female

Date of Birth: September 25, 1970 (estimated)

Place of Birth: Unknown

Natural Parents: Unknown

Case Number: 76-375/LSJ

Physical appearance: The child is cute and bright with an elongated face, tall height, slender figure, light complexion, medium black eyes, well-shaped nose, big ears, and clean body. . . . The children have been growing healthily without any disease. . . . The children are completely toilet trained.

Joy was a good child who took care of her younger sisters. The sisters were close, but they never really talked about being adopted. Joy didn't wonder about her birth mother, because she had been told she was dead. She was smart and worked hard in school, though there were

almost no other Asian kids there, and she was bullied. She was a cautious child who tried not to be noticed.

There was something wrong with the baby. Her legs were rigid, and one of her feet was twisted sideways. A doctor in Chattanooga gave a diagnosis of spastic quadriplegia, a kind of cerebral palsy, and said that she might never walk.

The agency transferred the baby to a foster home, and the foster parents named her Jocelyn Kate. The foster parents were young white evangelical Christians. They already had two biological children but got certified as foster parents out of a sense of mission. They fell in love with the baby. They held her and touched her and rocked her and talked to her. The baby's tiny legs were so stiff that the foster mother had to spend several hours every day massaging them, rotating her hips and stretching out her knees, to loosen them enough to change her diaper. The foster parents wanted very badly to adopt the baby, but they had no health insurance and couldn't afford the medical care they'd been told she would need for the rest of her life. They had her for a year.

Meanwhile, the agency was looking for adoptive parents. At first they tried for a Black family, because the baby was Black, but they couldn't find one that could take on the baby's medical needs. After a few months, they broadened their search. David and Teresa Burt, a white couple who had already adopted one baby with cerebral palsy, were able to take a second with similar requirements. The agency wrote that their fee was normally five thousand dollars, but since this baby had special needs they would reduce the price to fifteen hundred. If that was too much, they would take a thousand.

The Burts lived in Bellingham, Washington, a small city north of Seattle. They wanted a big family, and, influenced by the Zero Population Growth movement, they decided to adopt. They had one biological child, a daughter, when they were in their early twenties, and then David had a vasectomy.

The first child they adopted, in 1982, was a one-year-old white girl with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, who had been born weighing less than two pounds. About a year after that, they attended an event in Seattle called Kids Fest, sponsored by the state adoption office—children played, and if a prospective parent saw a child they were interested in they could try to interact with them. The Burts adopted a white boy they saw there.

A couple of years later, Teresa saw, in a binder of kids waiting to be adopted, a photo of a Black baby girl with cerebral palsy. The baby was cute, but it was the diagnosis that caught Teresa's eye. They knew how to take care of a kid like that; they were already set up with the equipment. When the Burts arrived to collect their new daughter from the foster home in Chattanooga, they discovered that the foster parents had named her Jocelyn Kate. But the Burts thought of her as Angela, because that was the name a caseworker had put on the paperwork, and they decided to call her that. Later, the Burts went to Kids Fest again and adopted a second Black child, and a couple of years after that they took in a pair of Black sisters from foster care in Kentucky. As it turned out, it seemed that Angela did not have spastic quadriplegia but a much milder form of cerebral palsy. Her twisted-up foot slowly turned downward, and by the time she was four she was running as well as any other child.

Bellingham was a very white place. Some remembered it having been a sundown town as late as the nineteen-seventies: anyone who wasn't white had to leave town by nightfall. It seemed to Angela that there were almost no Black kids in her elementary school. The family stood out in other ways as well—children of different races, some with visible disabilities, and sometimes a foster kid as well. There were always physical therapists coming and going in the house, and caseworkers with clipboards. One neighbor thought it was a group home. People in the grocery store would ask Teresa where she got all those children, and would say she was a saint for taking them in. Some people called her Mother Teresa. Teresa would reject these sorts of compliments, but they still made Angela feel like a charity case.

When Angela was a child, the only place she spent any real time with Black people other than her siblings was a summer program she went to with other adoptees. At home, she had Black people on TV. She saw that Magic Johnson's big smile looked kind of like hers and wondered if he was her birth father. She wondered if her birth mother could be Brandy, from "Cinderella." She asked her parents about her birth parents and they gave her her adoption paperwork.

Mother: Deborah Ann \_\_\_\_\_ was born on \_\_\_\_\_ 11, 1954. She is 4'11" tall, weighs 160 pounds has black hair with some streaks of gray and dark brown eyes. She has a large bone structure and a medium complexion. She has a religious background of a Baptist affiliation and her nationality background is Afro-American. Deborah is presently residing in a government housing project in the Chattanooga area and is currently being supported on the State Welfare System. Deborah has had four prior pregnancies all of which were live births.

She read this over and over. At first, all she thought about was her birth mother. When she was older, the fact that she had four siblings came into focus. Deborah's fourth child, a daughter, had also been given up for adoption, and Teresa asked the agency to contact her family, to see if the girls could be pen pals, but the family said no.

Deanna grew up next to Jones Creek, just outside Baltimore. Her father worked at a post office downtown, her mother worked at the V.A. in Fort Howard. They couldn't have kids, so they adopted two girls from different birth mothers, Deanna and her younger sister. The Dosses were conservative Pentecostal Christians, and their lives revolved around the church. Deanna often fell asleep under a pew during revival services that lasted into the night. When she was a child, sitting alone in her grandmother's back yard, she realized that she had a calling to the ministry.

All through childhood, she wondered about her birth parents—who they were, where they lived, whether they ever thought about her. Whenever she was in a crowd of people, like at a baseball game in the city, she would scan the faces to see if there was anyone who looked familiar. Sometimes she stood outside looking at the moon and would wonder if her birth mother, wherever she was, was looking at the same moon. Every now and then, she asked her mother about her birth parents, but she felt that the subject made her uncomfortable, so she mostly kept her questions to herself.

She went to Valley Forge, a Christian college, and met her future husband, Larry Shrodes. In 1989, Deanna gave birth to their first child, and she realized that this was the first time she had seen and touched a blood relative since her own birth. She understood more than she had before what it would be like to give up a baby. Suddenly, finding her birth mother felt urgent.

She started going to meetings of the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association at a local Unitarian church. The organization had been founded in 1971 by an adoptee named Florence Fisher; Fisher had been in a car crash, and her last thought before impact was I'm going to die and I don't know who I am. Deanna also contacted the agency that had brokered her adoption. She was told that she could petition the county court to open her records to a "confidential intermediary," who would contact her birth mother on her behalf. She agreed, and before long the intermediary called to say that she had spoken to Deanna's birth mother. The intermediary had told her that she would be proud of how Deanna had turned out—college educated, a pastor. The birth mother had said that she was sure she would be proud of Deanna, but she didn't think that Deanna would be proud of her. She didn't want to meet.

Standing holding the phone, Deanna felt her legs weaken. She thought that maybe her being a pastor had put her birth mother off—people always thought pastors were going to judge them. If only the intermediary hadn't mentioned that. She asked if she could send her a letter, but the intermediary said no, that wasn't allowed. Her birth mother had thirty days to change her mind. For thirty days, Deanna pleaded with God every way she knew. She fasted and prayed. But the intermediary called and told her that the answer was still no.

To be rejected by her birth mother a second time was almost more than she could take. But then, two years later, a pastor at her church told Deanna to pray about her mother again. This time, she felt God telling her that, although her birth mother had said no to the intermediary, she had not said no to her. Deanna restarted her search.

It was the early nineteen-nineties—there was no Internet that she had ready access to. But one day when she was home with the flu she saw Joseph J. Culligan, a private investigator, on a talk show. He had written a book, "You, Too, Can Find Anybody," and guests on the show testified that, thanks to the book, they had used public information to find people for less than twenty dollars. Deanna sent Larry straight out to buy it. There were all kinds of techniques in the book, all kinds of records you could search for addresses if you had a last name—liens, leases, bankruptcies, writs of garnishment. You could write to the D.M.V. or check abandoned-property files. The best source, though, was the Death Master File, which contained the Social Security Administration's death records since 1962. The Salvation Army's missing-persons program told her that they knew of a source in California who could gain access to the Death Master File for only thirteen dollars. She knew that her birth mother had grown up near Richmond, Virginia. She called California and asked for records of any man in Richmond with her birth mother's maiden name who had died within a certain period of time.

The information arrived in the mail a few weeks later—pages and pages of names. She wrote to libraries all over the city and ordered obituaries for every one of the names, looking for her mother's father. From her adoption paperwork she knew that her maternal grandfather had been an auto mechanic with six children, and that her birth mother was the youngest. The last obituary she received in the mail was of an auto mechanic who had had six children. That gave her her birth mother's current, married name. She dialed directory inquiries, got her mother's number, and called her.

A machine picked up and she heard her birth mother's voice for the first time. It was a deep, Southern voice. Deanna started crying. She called over and over. Larry came home, took one look at her, and knew instantly what had happened. At the time, they were both working as pastors at a church in Dayton, Ohio, and had two toddlers. Deanna called that evening to make

sure that her birth mother wasn't out of town; when she answered the phone, Deanna hung up. She and Larry took the kids and drove through the night to Richmond.

Deanna had been imagining this moment for years, and she knew exactly what she was going to do. She knew she had to look at her birth mother's face at least once, so she wasn't going to risk calling first. She had brought a camera—she would ask to take a photograph of her birth mother if it was to be the only time she saw her. The next day, in the hotel room, she changed clothes several times and settled on a pink suit. She waited until evening, walked up to her birth mother's house, and knocked on the door.

The woman who opened the door was smiling, and blond, which took Deanna aback—the adoption paperwork had said that her hair was dark, like Deanna's. Deanna said, Please don't be afraid, but my name is Deanna, and I think you know who I am. The woman stopped smiling. For a long time, she stood in the doorway and stared at her. Deanna asked if she could come in.

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Angela Tucker walking down a sidewalk.

Angela Tucker believes transracial adoption should happen only as a last resort.

Her birth mother gestured for her to sit at the kitchen table, and began nervously moving around from stove to counter and back, making coffee and picking things up and putting them down again. She said, I know you don't understand why I made the decision I made. She started crying, and began to tell Deanna about all the mistakes she had made in her life and how sorry she was for all of them. She told her that she had made a lot of bad choices, including her relationship with Deanna's father. She had failed in her relationship with her other children's father, and now she was divorced. She listed other things she was ashamed of—things she'd done and things that had happened in her family.

Deanna felt God telling her, Say nothing, say nothing, just let her talk. She was terrified that something would break the spell and get her kicked out. She kept thinking, I'm still here, she hasn't kicked me out, I'm still here.

When Deanna's birth mother was pregnant, her parents had sent her to the Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers, in Norfolk, a hundred miles away. People had treated her like a whore, and she felt like a whore. Her family was mortified by her situation, and had told her that she must keep her pregnancy a secret or she would be disowned. She was told that giving up the baby for adoption and pretending the whole thing had never happened was her only chance to redeem herself. If she gave the baby up, it would be raised in a decent home, and she would be able to pass herself off as a marriageable woman. It was the right thing to do.

There was also no other option. The baby's father had refused to marry her or help her. While she was alone in the home for unwed mothers, he just went on with his life. She lied on the adoption agency's paperwork: she gave them a fake name for him and a fake job; she said he worked in a drugstore. She wanted to make sure that the child would never find him, or he her.

After a long time, Deanna's birth mother stopped talking, and Deanna said, We've all made mistakes, but I went to Hell and back to find you, and I would go to Hell and back to find you again. At that point, her birth mother seemed to realize that Deanna was not going to reject her. She stood up from her side of the table, came over, wrapped her arms around Deanna's head, and wailed.

When Joy went to college, at first she mostly had white friends. Then, in her second year, she became friends with a group of Black students and began to understand herself as a person of color. Later still, she made some Asian friends, and some Korean international students asked her to start an Asian student union. She felt like a fraud, as if she weren't really Asian, but the international students accepted her as such, and thought it was fun to fill in the gaps in her knowledge. They wanted to know whether she could use chopsticks, how high her spice tolerance was. She ate with them and found that her mouth still watered when she smelled kimchi. She tried to teach herself Koreanness. She put on a fashion show, for which she learned how to wear hanbok and do a fan dance.

After she graduated, Joy decided to visit Korea. She wrote to the orphanage where she had lived and asked if they would take her on as a volunteer. They told her she was welcome. When she arrived, in the fall of 1993, everything felt very foreign. She spoke no Korean. Things smelled bad. The water was cold. What was she doing there?

She tried to compare the orphanage to her memories of it twenty years earlier. She remembered being cold all the time; now the building had indoor plumbing and central heating. She saw that the river she'd remembered washing clothes in was actually a stream. The director of the orphanage, who'd been there when Joy was a child and was now in her nineties, asked her, Are you here to meet your birth mother? Joy said, No, she's dead, and the director said, Oh, yes, right, right, right.

After a few months at the orphanage, she felt something in her shift. She started to understand more Korean, and to speak it. She saw how hard the children worked—in school, and on the orphanage's farm—and how much disciplinary beating and humiliation the younger ones endured at the hands of the older ones. There was little warmth or affection in the orphanage, no joking or playing games. They worked, watched TV, ate, slept. There were only a few staff members for more than fifty children, from little kids to seventeen-year-olds, and some seemed to have no interest in the children.

She also realized that none of the kids were actually orphans. They knew who their parents were, and most of them went home on national holidays. The orphanage was a combination of government boarding school and foster care—there was no American-style foster care in Korea. Usually there had been some kind of crisis in the family, like illness, or divorce, or poverty, that meant the parents couldn't take care of their child. Most of the children thought their stay in the orphanage would be temporary, but often it wasn't. Many became estranged from their birth families and couldn't find them when they aged out.

The children were unlikely to be adopted—many fewer Korean children were being adopted abroad by then. The first wave of adoptions, after the Korean War—mostly the biracial children of Korean women and American soldiers—was long over. Adoptions had risen to a peak in the seventies and eighties. When Joy was a child, the Korean government had encouraged them, as a way of ridding itself of financially burdensome children, and as a kind of soft diplomacy with the West. But at the time of the 1988 Summer Olympics, in Seoul, the exporting of so many children became a source of embarrassment to Korea, and since then the numbers had declined.

Several young people who had lived in the orphanage when Joy was there came back regularly, to visit. They had hated their time there, but now the orphanage kids were their family, and the orphanage their home. At first they assumed that Joy had been the lucky one—she could speak English, she had been to college, she lived in New York. But once her Korean was fluent enough she told them how lonely it had been growing up in a town with no Korean people. They couldn't fathom a place with no Korean people; they couldn't fathom that she would question whether she was Korean or not, or not know what that meant.

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Toward the end of her time there, a woman who worked in the director's office told Joy that her birth mother was looking for her. Joy said that wasn't possible, her birth mother was dead. The woman said, No, it's true—an investigator had called on her behalf. Joy said, If she is my mother, she will have a photograph of me. The investigator had a photograph—it was a picture of a three-year-old girl, the age Joy was when she had last seen her mother. As soon as Joy saw the photograph, she knew it was her. She felt the blood leaving her face. She didn't know what to do. She suggested that she could sit in a park and the investigator could arrange for her birth mother to walk by her, so that she could see she was O.K. but they wouldn't have to speak. The investigator then told Joy that her mother was dying. Joy suspected that this was a ploy, but it forced her hand. She agreed to meet her mother the following week.

She dressed for the meeting in her usual outfit of jeans, a T-shirt, and Doc Martens, but a young woman who worked at the orphanage told her she couldn't possibly meet her birth mother looking like that. The woman took her to a store and made her buy a dress and stockings, and then, looking at her feet, said, You can't wear those, either. Joy made her way to the investigator's office, which turned out to be in a dirty back alley by a fish market. She picked her way through in her new shoes.

She sat in the investigator's office, and two older women came out from behind a screen. One sat next to her, the other across from her. She looked at the women and felt nothing. The woman across from her said, I don't think this is the right person. She asked Joy, Do you have a scar on your right leg? Joy said, Yes, I do—it's a burn mark from an iron. The woman started crying and said how sorry she was, that it was her fault, that she had told Joy not to go near the iron but she did, and then she didn't cry or tell anyone about her burn, because she was afraid of getting in trouble. Now the woman next to Joy started to cry, and grasped her hand—and Joy realized that this woman, not the one who had been doing the talking, was her birth mother. The other woman was her mother's sister.

She didn't look at her mother and her mother didn't look at her. They both looked down. Joy asked her, What size are your feet? They had the same size feet. The mother, still holding Joy's hand, took a ring off her own hand and slipped it onto Joy's finger. She said, I have been wearing this ring waiting for the day I would be able to give it to you. She said she had been looking for Joy for twenty-one years. Then Joy started to cry.

She and her mother spent the weekend together. Joy had a half brother who was seventeen, and who had been told of her existence only days before the meeting, but he welcomed her easily. With her mother, it was harder. She didn't talk much, or look Joy in the eye. They paged through photo albums, and there was a photograph of the mother at the age of twenty-four, Joy's age, and she looked exactly like her. Joy said, I want to tell you about my life. Do you have

any questions? Her mother said, The last time I saw you, you were a three-year-old child. Now you are a grown woman. I don't know who you are.

Little by little, over years, Joy pieced together the story of her early childhood. Her mother and father had married young, before he had done his military service. For three years, while the father was in the military, Joy's mother lived with her parents in Incheon and raised Joy, then named Eun-hee. When Eun-hee's father came back from his service, he told her mother that he wanted a divorce. But, in Korea at that time, a child belonged to its father. Her father didn't particularly want the child, but she was his, so he took her to be raised by his parents.

For two years, Eun-hee's mother heard nothing from him. Meanwhile, she opened a small shop that sold cosmetics and things like cigarettes and gum. One day, Eun-hee's father walked into the shop to buy cigarettes. She demanded to know where her daughter was. He said he didn't know. She said, What do you mean you don't know? He said he couldn't talk, he had to work—he was a taxi-driver. She told him she would pay him a day's wages if he would stay with her and explain what had happened, and eventually he admitted that Eun-hee was in an orphanage.

The mother went straight to the orphanage, which was in another town. The people there told her she had the wrong orphanage, her daughter wasn't there. But she was convinced that she had the right one and kept going back, again and again, being told each time that it was the wrong orphanage, until finally she sat all day in the office of the orphanage school until the director came out. The director saw Eun-hee's mother, and the mother looked so much like Eun-hee that the director knew immediately who she was. The director told her that Eun-hee had indeed been in that orphanage, but she had been adopted and was no longer in Korea.

On one visit, years after they had met, Joy told her mother that she had always believed she was dead. Joy's mother said, Well, of course you thought I was dead. How else could a child make sense of being in an orphanage? Joy told her mother about her memory of leaving at three—of being in the car and seeing her grandmother and grandfather waving goodbye. But it turned out that her mind had altered the memory in a way that made it less painful. It wasn't your grandfather there standing with your grandmother, her mother said. It was me.

When Angela enrolled at Seattle Pacific University, a small Christian college, she realized how different it was to be a Black woman without her white parents around. She was perfectly comfortable on the predominantly white campus, but to the other students she looked out of place. There she met Bryan Tucker, a white man she would soon marry.

After she graduated, she took a job at Bethany Christian Services, the agency that had handled her adoption. She knew that caseworkers were allowed to see adoption paperwork and thought that maybe if she was an employee she would be able to see hers, but she wasn't. As a caseworker in infant placement, she saw other adoptees' original birth certificates all the time. When she arranged an adoption and ordered an amended birth certificate for the child, she felt treacherous, as though she were betraying the child whose origins she was concealing.

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Working at Bethany and, later, with other agencies, she realized that, although their mission statements always talked about finding parents for children, in fact the agencies were in the business of finding children for parents. She saw that the birth mother was more or less disregarded once her baby had been handed over. In meetings, Angela would ask, Did anyone

follow up with the birth mother? Did anyone teach her how to stop the breast milk from coming in so she isn't in pain? Her colleagues would sigh and say that this was a kind, sensitive thought, but they needed to think about the baby.

In most states, a birth mother had a short window of time—anywhere from a few months to ninety-six hours—in which she could change her mind. As the time passed, adoptive parents would ask Angela anxiously whether she had heard from the birth mother; then, when the window had closed, they would be relieved and happy, and, although Angela understood why they felt that way, she found it hard. She talked to adoptive parents about the merits of an open adoption, and most agreed in principle, but in practice they usually didn't make an effort to keep in touch with the birth mother, or they cut her off on the ground that seeing her might be upsetting for the child. There was little enforcement of openness in adoption—it was up to them.

Since Angela hadn't been able to see her original birth certificate at Bethany, she decided that she and Bryan would search for her birth mother on their own. She noticed that there were places in her paperwork where her birth mother's last name had not been whited out—it was Johnson. A Google search for "Deborah Johnson" in Tennessee returned several million results. She and Bryan called all the Deborah Johnsons they could find phone numbers for, dozens of them, but came up with nothing.

One night, Bryan was reading Angela's paperwork again when he noticed something that she had, bafflingly, not focussed on in the hundreds of times she had read it: the first name of her biological father. Unlike her mother's name, it was unusual—Oterious. They could see by the size of the space that had been whited out that his last name was four letters long. They Googled "Oterious" and came up with one result in Tennessee: Oterious Bell. They searched on Spokeo, MySpace, Classmates.com, MyLife, and the International Soundex Reunion Registry, and finally found, on the Web site of a local radio station, a blog post, "Sandy Bell could use a lil help please." It seemed that Oterious (Sandy) Bell had become locally famous, making the rounds of bars and restaurants in Chattanooga, selling flowers. He'd just been in the hospital for a month and was struggling to pay his bills. Angela found a photo of him online. He looked exactly like her.

When she was growing up, Angela had barely thought about her birth father. But, having found him, she wanted to meet him—maybe he could tell her who her mother was. She decided to fly to Tennessee, along with Bryan and her parents. Her parents had supported her through her search, and she wanted them near her for this, although one of her deepest fears was that her birth mother would consider her a racial fraud. What would Deborah Johnson think if she turned up surrounded by white people, who were her family?

When she got out of the airport, the muggy air hit her and she started to sweat. She had allergies, and her lungs felt heavy and clotted. She had fantasized that Chattanooga would feel like home, but now she just wanted to get back inside. Suddenly there were Black people everywhere, but she thought she sounded ridiculous with her Pacific Northwest accent. That evening, she and Bryan went to a bar and told people she was looking for Sandy Bell. One person after another told her what a character he was, with blue suede shoes and a bicycle decorated with bells, flags, and ribbons. Somebody said that they thought his mother lived in the Mary Walker Towers.

The next morning, standing outside the towers, she heard a bicycle bell, and spotted a man on a bicycle wearing a straw cowboy hat with a toy sheriff's badge pinned to a faux-leather vest. She called out his name and told him why she was looking for him. He stared at her, and, reaching into his basket, presented her with a flower. Then he said, "It's like I'm looking in a mirror." Angela beckoned for everyone else, waiting a few yards off, to come and meet him, too. He invited them to return later to his mother's apartment and meet the rest of his family.

That evening, surrounded by uncles and aunts in Sandy's mother's tiny apartment, Angela asked Sandy about Deborah. He said he thought he knew where she lived now, and his brother Jay jumped up and suggested they drive by her house right away. Looking out of the car window in Deborah's neighborhood, Angela saw abandoned vehicles and brick shotgun houses. She wondered whether the neighborhood was safe to be in. She wondered how they looked to the people she saw sitting on their stoops—an S.U.V. and a minivan pulling up to the curb. Deborah's house had black garbage bags taped over its front window. Angela had thought that they were just going to look at the house, but suddenly she saw Sandy jump out of his brother's car and walk up to the front door. She's in there! a neighbor shouted from the next-door stoop. She hasn't come out for a while, but I've seen her lights come on.

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The door opened and Deborah came out. She was short. Her hair was gray. Looking at the woman across the street, Angela felt as though she were in a fugue state. She opened the car door and walked over to the house. She said, Hi, my name is Angela. I think you may be my birth mother. The woman stood looking at the ground and said, I don't have children. I'm sorry, but I'm not the person you're looking for.

Angela had asked Bryan to film the encounter, because she knew she would be too overwhelmed to take it in. In their hotel room she played the twenty-eight-second clip of their meeting over and over for forty-five minutes, until Bryan asked her to stop.

Every adoption is a kind of conversion. When a child is issued an amended birth certificate, the child is, in one sense, born again. Christianity and adoption go back a long way. Not all proselytizing religions embrace adoption. Many Muslim countries prohibit it. A child can be taken in by a family acting as guardians, but new parents cannot take the place of the original ones. A child's lineage cannot be severed.

Deanna found it tricky being a Pentecostal Christian among adoptees. Her anti-abortion views had lost her some friends, although her closest adoptee friend was pro-choice and an agnostic. It was striking how pro-choice the adoptee community was. A refrain you heard again and again, in various forms, was, Do not make more people like me. A lot of adoptees had been told by their parents that they were adopted because God put them in the wrong tummy, or that God had planned adoption for them since the foundation of the world. Because of this, they had rejected God. Deanna had been asked over and over, How are you a Christian?

But, as hard as it was for her to be a Christian among adoptees, being an adoptee among Christians could be even harder. Adoption was celebrated in evangelical circles as a selfless act of loving rescue. If an evangelical expressed pain about her adoption, she was likely to be reminded that all Christians were adopted in Christ. Deanna found it frustrating when Christians wanted to stop abortions but wouldn't promote birth control.

Christians had driven much of the international-adoption business for decades. The mass adoption of foreign children by Americans had been started in the fifties by Harry and Bertha Holt, a Christian couple in Oregon whose motive was explicitly evangelical. They had chartered planes to transport children from Korea, sometimes more than a hundred per flight. But, in the more recent past, in the evangelical world, adoption had become much more important.

People often accused evangelicals of being not so much pro-life as pro-birth. Adoption was the answer to that: if there were unwanted babies, they would take them in. James 1:27—“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble”—had become a central theological imperative, though nobody seemed to talk much about the widows. Many evangelicals who already had biological children adopted for religious reasons. Some even adopted children who they knew were not orphans so that they could be raised as Christians, then return to their homes to convert others.

Congregations were told that millions of children were languishing in orphanages and might never have parents if they weren't rescued. Sometimes the price of adoption was referred to as “ransom,” as though the child were a hostage. The numbers talked about grew larger and larger—after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti it was claimed that there were a million orphans there, a ninth of the total population. There were said to be a hundred and forty-three million, then a hundred and sixty-three million, then two hundred and ten million orphans in the world.

Christians responded to these terrible numbers by coming forward to adopt. But international adoptions were expensive—sometimes as much as fifty or sixty thousand dollars—and where there were lots of people willing to pay that kind of money for a child it was almost inevitable that corruption would follow. Deanna had read a book, “The Child Catchers,” by Kathryn Joyce, which laid out in horrifying detail how it worked. For one thing, there was a certain motivated confusion about what an orphan was. In many countries, as in Korea, children were placed in orphanages not because they didn't have families but because their families weren't able to take care of them. Sometimes things would get better and the family would take them back. Most of the millions of orphans cited in the statistics were actually “single orphans,” meaning they had one living parent.

Angela holds a photograph of her birth mother Deborah Johnson and her adoptive mother Teresa Burt.

Angela holds a photograph of her birth mother, Deborah Johnson, and her adoptive mother, Teresa Burt.

In many cases, a child could have returned home if the family had had a little more money—a fraction of the cost of an adoption. And some Christian charities did do family-preservation work. But, with so much money at stake, children in orphanages were being adopted abroad without their parents' knowledge, or parents were told that the child was going to America to get an education and would soon return home. Orphanages were paid part of the fees, so they had good reason to find more and more adoptable children. Some children were kidnapped from their families, sometimes by traffickers who viewed themselves as missionaries. Sometimes a well-intentioned American couple would adopt a child only to discover, much later, that the child had a family that wanted it back.

When trafficking allegations grew too loud to ignore, some countries shut down their international-adoption programs altogether. Ethiopia and Guatemala had done so—Guatemala (which had been sending one out of every hundred of its children to America) in 2008, Ethiopia

in 2018. As news of corruption in the orphan business spread in evangelical circles, and as more countries closed their adoption programs, the rates of international adoption rapidly declined. In 2021, Bethany Christian Services, one of the largest adoption agencies in the U.S., closed its international-adoption program after nearly forty years.

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But evangelical groups were active in domestic adoptions, too, promoting to American women the idea that giving up a baby was a heroic act of love. Deanna believed that, except in cases of abuse or neglect, it was wrong to adopt a child unless that child had no family at all that could take it in. She tried to persuade people she knew that the thing to do was not adopt babies but give mothers what they needed to keep them. “People will say, in social-media posts, If you’re pregnant and can’t take care of your baby, I’ll adopt them,” she said. “I want to see people making ads that say, If you’re pregnant and can’t take care of your baby, I’m opening my checkbook, I will take you in, I will foot the bill for whatever you need.” She had done that herself, taking in a child for a year while the child’s mother, a relative, was in rehab. But she hadn’t had much success persuading anyone else.

When Joy came back from her time in Korea in the summer of 1994, she was angry—angry at the Korean government for giving so many children away, and angry at the ignorance of the Americans who had told her that she had been rescued, that Korea was poor and backward, that Korean men were abusive. A couple of years later, she joined Also-Known-As, or A.K.A.—a new organization based in New York that had been started by a friend of hers, Hollee McGinnis, to create a community of international adoptees. She began spending time with six or seven women in the group, all Korean adoptees around her age.

Something was happening among adoptees. In 1996, at the same time that A.K.A. was coming together, Marley Greiner, an adoptee and a reporter at the Columbus Free Press, started posting on a Usenet newsgroup, alt.adoption, and signed her posts “Bastard Nation.” Later that year, Greiner helped to form a group of the same name, in the spirit of Queer Nation and ACT UP. She envisioned Yippie-style actions—mass burning of amended birth certificates, “practical jokes” on social workers. “For those of you dear readers who may think that I had a terrible adoption experience, I did not,” Greiner wrote on the Bastard Nation Web site. “But the closed adoption system is a system of lies which would not be tolerated in any other forum.”

In the late nineties, Susan Cox, a Korean adoptee, came up with the idea of convening adult Korean adoptees for the first time. The Gathering, as it was called, was held in Washington, D.C., in 1999. It was decided to survey the participants, and Joy, who was then working for the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a think tank, co-wrote a paper discussing the results. It turned out that many adoptees had been abused by their adoptive parents. More than a third of the respondents said that when they were growing up they viewed themselves as Caucasian.

Joy got a master’s in social work and took a job with an adoption agency. She wanted to understand how adoption worked, particularly home studies, through which agencies interviewed couples and matched them with children. She talked to couples who spoke about their years-long struggles with infertility, and realized how traumatized many of them were. She was required, as part of the home study, to ask about this. Had they mourned the biological child that they would not have? Had they reconciled themselves to that loss, enough to make room for this new child, who would be very different?

She pictured the adopted child grown up, asking the parents, How is it that everyone in this community is white, and everyone who comes to our dinner table is white? Even if she believed that the family was not going to honor the culture of the child, there was nothing much she could do about it—to be counselled out of adoption, parents had to have something serious on their record. But she felt she was playing God with the lives of children. She began to sleep badly at night, and when she did sleep she had nightmares about children asking her, What were you thinking, putting me in that house?

After a year and a half, she could no longer bear doing placements, and she moved to the agency's post-adoption division. She paid home visits to see what the new adoptees needed, from medicine to translators. She loved that work. She felt that she was there in the trenches with the child and the parents as they faced each other for the first time, with all their fears and limitations and misunderstandings and difficult histories and longing and love.

Joy had met her future husband in college, though they didn't start dating until later. He was Korean also, but not an adoptee. It was unusual for a Korean adoptee to date a Korean. Adoptees were greeted with suspicion by Korean families. Joy had dated other Korean American men, but all of them broke up with her after their mothers found out she was adopted. Not only was she not a real Korean girl, but how could they know she was a good Korean girl when they couldn't meet her parents? Joy felt that she and her husband were an interracial couple.

When she got pregnant, in her mid-thirties, she prepared diligently to become a mother. She went into therapy and read a lot of books. When she gave birth to her son, she was afraid. Is he mine? she wondered. Will he love me? She had to leave him in the hospital overnight because he had jaundice. That night she sobbed, thinking, Will they take him away from me? Will I be allowed to bring him home?

Several months after Deborah told Angela that she was not her mother, Bryan suggested that they try to find someone else in Deborah's family. She heard back from an aunt, Belinda, right away:

DEBORAH DENIED IT???? GOD HELP US ALL, HERE IS MY NUMBER, CALL ME IF YOU WANT. . . . I'M BLOWN AWAY, SO SORRY, DON'T KNOW WHY, WE ARE A CLOSE KNIT FAMILY

Belinda put her in touch with her siblings Timothy, James, and Carolyn, whom everyone called Nay-Nay. Angela had imagined her siblings growing up with Deborah, knowing deeply who they were. But when she spoke with Nay-Nay it turned out that they had not been fully raised by Deborah, either. The boys had lived mostly with their grandmother; Nay-Nay had lived with her grandmother until she was nine, then she had lived sometimes with Deborah and sometimes at a friend's place. Sometimes she didn't see Deborah at all, didn't even know where she was.

About a year after her trip to Chattanooga, Angela heard that Deborah was ready to talk, so she called her. This time, Deborah acknowledged her right away. "Off the board, I need to apologize to you," she said. "When I first met you, that was not to send you away—I should have gotten in touch with you myself, to let you know that I needed us to meet one-on-one, without all that rhetoric out there." When Sandy had turned up at her door after twenty-five years, with his brother and Angela and a bunch of white people, she was caught off guard. Whatever was

going on, it was not the kind of thing she liked to discuss in front of half a dozen strangers in the middle of the street.

“There’s a lot I’ve done that I can’t explain to you,” she said. “I’m angry with myself. . . . My mother did not raise me like that.” She was angry with herself mostly for not taking care of herself while she was pregnant. When Angela was born, a doctor had told her that the baby was sick, and she was led to believe that if she kept her she would probably die. Deborah said to the agency, I’ll sign this paper on one condition: don’t show me that baby, because if you do I’m not signing anything. “The hurt that I feel,” Deborah told Angela, “it will always be there. And I’ll take that to my grave.”

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Deborah remembered telling Sandy, when she found out she was pregnant, that the baby was his. She was friendly with his family—she had known his sister since high school. But Sandy had been told by a doctor that he could never have children, so he didn’t believe her. One of his brothers was a professional boxer making money, and she figured he thought she was just after some of it, so she disappeared. For a while she lived on the street, sleeping in a different place each night; then she found an apartment in a housing project. She knew her family would judge her harshly for giving the baby up, so she kept her pregnancy a secret from them.

She had already had four children. Deborah had kept her first three because she was doing O.K. then. She had a job in the kitchen of a nursing home, and her mother was around to help her. Her mother was pretty much raising the children. Deborah told them to call their grandmother Mother and to call her Deborah. She felt she didn’t deserve the title “mother”—she was just the birth mother. When she had a fourth child, a girl, the year before Angela, she knew she could not take care of her and gave her up for adoption.

After she gave birth to Angela, Deborah left the hospital on her own. She went back to her apartment and didn’t leave for a long time. Even though she believed she’d done the right thing for the baby, she became so depressed that she didn’t care what happened. She felt she had been ripped bone from bone. After a year or so, she returned to the adoption agency to ask if the baby was still there. When a caseworker told her she’d been adopted, Deborah went back home and drank Coca-Cola all day, until a doctor told her she had diabetes and if she kept drinking Coke it could kill her. She bought a baby doll, and then another, and another. She and the baby dolls watched television together.

Even a decade after that first phone call, Angela felt that she and Deborah did not have the relationship she had imagined. When she visited Deborah, she liked to have her mom or Bryan there with her. Angela felt Deborah had never really claimed her as her child. Deborah always said that she wasn’t her mother, Teresa was. Angela had almost come to accept that she had had to be adopted.

When she had first met her aunt Belinda, Belinda had told her that Deborah didn’t have a motherly instinct. When Deborah heard this she was so angry that Belinda would say something so hateful and untrue that she avoided her for years. But Angela didn’t know this, and the idea that Deborah had never wanted to be a mother lodged deep in Angela’s brain. When she was in her mid-twenties, shortly after she first spent time with Deborah, she went to a doctor to get her tubes tied. The doctor told her she was too young and wouldn’t do it, but ten years later she was still determined not to have kids.

Angela had not connected the two things at the time she went to the doctor, but now she could see it. Deborah was so different from her—they didn't even resemble each other physically, as she and Sandy did. But not wanting to be a mother, she thought, might be something—something profound—that she and Deborah had in common. “Probably it has a lot to do with learning who Deborah is,” she said. “Wanting to be closer to her. Wanting to feel like I'm really her kin.”

For twenty years, Deanna didn't press her birth mother on the subject of her birth father for fear of upsetting her. But time was running out—if she didn't find him soon, it was increasingly unlikely that she would find him alive. In 2013, she wrote her birth mother a letter to ask her one last time to tell her her father's name. Her birth mother called and said that she would take his name to her grave, and, since the only two people who also knew it were dead, Deanna would never find him. Deanna told her gently that she could try to find him through DNA.

The idea that there could be other ways to search had clearly not occurred to her birth mother. On the other end of the phone, her tone changed right away. She said that she had faked her emotions during their reunion and for years after. She said that if Deanna tried to find her father she would never speak to her again. Deanna felt as if she'd been shot. While she was still on the phone, she logged on to a private Facebook page for Lost Daughters, a group of adoptee women who blogged about adoption in public and supported each other in private. She typed, Is anybody there? Is anybody there? Several of them were online, and wrote back to tell her she wasn't alone.

On the phone, her birth mother told her that the adoptee community she was part of was a sickness that had infected her with the belief that she had to know who her father was. She should just let it go. What nobody but adoptees seemed to understand was that not knowing who her father was wasn't a matter of curiosity—it felt to Deanna like life or death. It was like the not-knowing of a person whose child had gone missing.

All her mother had told her was that her father was Greek. She started a private Facebook group, Finding Mr. Greek, and enlisted a group of “search angels”—adoptees or birth mothers or other people who liked to assist in searches, who knew about DNA testing or genealogy. They posted on Facebook trying to find members of her birth mother's high-school class. They called people in the Greek church in Richmond. Deanna also prayed to God to put the name of her father into her head. At one point, she prayed for many hours over three days. At last she sensed God saying to her, Your father's name is Gus. Deanna immediately got in touch with the people who were helping her and told them of this new development, acknowledging that some of them might think she was crazy. They decided to look for all the Guses in Richmond who were within ten years of her mother's age. She found out that, in Greek American communities, Gus could be a nickname for Constantine, Kostas, or Konstantinos, so they made lists of all the men of the right age in Richmond with those names. There were dozens of them, but if they were alive Deanna called them. If they were dead, she called relatives. She asked many people to take a DNA test for her, and many did. But at the end of all the calls and the DNA tests none of the Guses was a match.

For almost nine years, she got no closer. Anytime someone popped up on one of the DNA Web sites as a distant match, friends would stay up late looking up genealogical records and family trees, but they never found anyone close enough to identify him. At one point, Deanna started

saying to her group of searchers, He must be dead by now—we are looking for a grave. But she kept looking because, even if he was dead, there might be a sister or a brother or a cousin who could tell her what kind of man he'd been.

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Then, in May, 2022, one of her searchers called her at work and told her that a Greek first-cousin DNA match had popped up on 23andMe, and she would know who her father was in a matter of hours. The searchers started building out the cousin's family tree, hoping that his mother didn't have several brothers. She didn't—she had one brother. He was sixteen years older than Deanna's birth mother. His name was Gus.

Gus was ninety-one and in a nursing home. A few months earlier, adult protective services had found him alone in his home in Richmond in terrible condition; they forced him into a nursing home, because he couldn't take care of himself and had no one to help. Deanna arranged to meet him over FaceTime. She asked him if he remembered meeting her birth mother in 1965, and told him she was the child of that relationship. He believed her right away and started to cry.

She drove to Richmond and spent a week with him. He had been a professional ballroom dancer, he told her. He was a bon vivant, always flirting with women, but he had never married. He told her, I don't want to die alone in here. So she made up a room for him in her house with a hospital bed. She and Larry were living in a suburban development in Wesley Chapel, Florida, just outside Tampa. She decorated the room for Gus with mementos from his house in Richmond—a pair of two-tone wing tips, his dancing trophies, a portrait of him in his younger days—and brought him home.

He'd had no idea that she had been adopted. In his Greek community, adoption was rare—there was always someone in the family who would raise a child—and he was furious that she had been raised by strangers. At first, not wanting to upset him, Deanna said nothing. But then, one day, when he was roaring about how outrageous it was that her mother had given her up, Deanna said, Gus, what did you expect? She was kicked out of her parents' house, she had nowhere to go, and you lied to her, you never helped her. He didn't bring the subject up again. They had seven months together before he died.

By her mid-thirties, Angela had made a life of talking about adoption in every possible medium. She had a podcast, "The Adoptee Next Door." She had a Web series, "The Adopted Life," in which she interviewed transracial adoptees. She posted on Instagram as "angieadoptee." She had written a book, "You Should Be Grateful," blending her own adoption experience with those of others. She and Bryan had made several short films about adoption, in addition to a full-length documentary he had made about her reunion with her birth parents, called "Closure."

They lived in a two-story house in the south end of Seattle, in a quiet housing development around a small park where people walked their dogs. From home, she hosted bimonthly meetings of adult adoptees, and mentored kids one-on-one. Some of the kids she had met in recent years had truly open adoptions. One boy referred to his birth mother, who was in prison, as Mother, and to his two adoptive mothers as Momma and Mom. Kids would talk casually about staying with their birth mother for the weekend, or their birth mother coming to watch their baseball games. To older adoptees, too anxious about hurting their adoptive parents to tell them that they read blogs about adoption, much less to search for their birth parents, this was astonishing.

More recently, Angela had developed “Cultivating an Anti-Racist Support Network” workshops for parents who had adopted, or were thinking of adopting, kids of color. It was through one of these workshops that she had met Ali and Drew Fleming, who lived in New York. Ali and Drew knew they couldn’t have a baby the ordinary way, and they had thought that adoption was the ethical alternative. Since Drew and his family were white but Ali’s family was from India, they had signed up for Angela’s workshop to prepare the ground for their interracial family.

They had first thought of adopting from India, but then they realized that that would make it nearly impossible for the child to know its birth parents, and they had heard about corruption problems in international adoption, so they started looking domestically. They hired an adoption attorney, who recommended that they not go through an agency, because an agency could demand tens of thousands of dollars up front which they wouldn’t get back, even if they never got a child. Ali also discovered that, if a woman agreed to give them her baby when it was born, the agency would ask for still more money, which they would not get back either, even if the woman changed her mind. That was bad not only because they might spend tens of thousands of dollars for no baby, but also because it was so much money that it could give the woman the impression that the couple had already bought her baby, and feel pressured to relinquish. No, the attorney said, they should try to find a mother on their own.

There were ways to do this. They sent letters to churches and pregnancy crisis centers and ob-gyn offices, but Ali and Drew were pro-choice and this felt predatory to them. They created a Web site advertising themselves as potential parents—he was a doctor, she was a math teacher, they had two dogs, surely all that would look good. They hired adoption consultants who taught them how to run ads on Facebook and Instagram that targeted women who were looking for parents. Ali was advised to spell her name Allie so it didn’t sound Middle Eastern. They were advised not to post any photos of Indian holidays on their Web site, but that there should be a Christmas tree.

They were contacted by about thirty women. Some were scams, but in most cases, as far as she could tell, the women were really pregnant. Most already had kids. Ali spent hours texting with the women and talking to them on video calls. Many of them were conflicted about giving up their baby. In many cases what was preventing them from keeping it was a relatively small amount of money—a couple of thousand dollars. She kept talking women out of placing their baby, though she realized that this was counterproductive. The more women she talked to, the less she could imagine a situation where it would be better for both mother and baby if the baby came to her.

By this time, she and Drew were starting to feel nauseated and sullied by the adoption business. Reading around online, Ali had discovered that there was a “second chance” re-homing adoption market, for children whom parents had adopted but didn’t want anymore, or couldn’t keep. These tended to be older children, often from other countries. Their situation was so bleak, Ali could barely think about it. They contacted their attorney and asked about surrogacy. Advertisement

When Ali DM’d Angela on Instagram to say that they had decided not to adopt after all, Angela was glad. In her conversations with prospective parents, she tried to make them see how fraught transracial adoption was. She told parents that getting a Black doll for your child, taking them to an Ethiopian restaurant, sending them to transracial-adoptee summer camp, was not

enough. All that just produced a sense that you were performing Blackness, Angela would say. What Black children needed was actual Black people in their lives. Most people who found their way to her were going to agree with that, but making it happen was another matter. She said, “I hear almost every day in my consults with white parents, We know we should have Black and brown kids in our kids’ lives, but, like, how do we find them, and what do we say when we see one?”

Joy Lieberthal Rho sits on a grey armchair.

Joy Lieberthal Rho’s birth mother searched for her for twenty-one years.

Some years before, Angela had given a talk at a conference and told the story of her adoption by white parents, and afterward an older Black woman came up to her. You are my worst fear realized, the woman said. You aren’t a true Black person. I’m sorry the system erased you from our culture. Angela was stricken. The woman had introduced herself as a member of the National Association of Black Social Workers, which in 1972 had issued a manifesto condemning transracial adoption. “Only a Black family,” it stated, “can transmit the emotional and sensitive subtleties of perception and reaction essential for a Black child’s survival in a racist society.”

Angela no longer believed that there was such a thing as a true Black person—she felt more confident in her Blackness. And, whereas when she was younger she had believed that transracial adoptees were less truly Black than people raised in Black families, she now felt that the experience of growing up Black in a white home spoke to the core of what it meant to be Black in America.

On the other hand, she had begun to wonder whether the National Association of Black Social Workers might have been partly right—that transracial adoption should happen only as a last resort. She loved her adoptive parents, and was grateful to them for supporting her wholeheartedly in her search for her birth parents, and even in her questioning of transracial adoption. But she also wished she wasn’t adopted. It was so difficult to explain that to most people.

She found that people tended to understand the problems of transracial adoption more readily in the context of Native Americans. She was closely watching a Supreme Court case, *Haaland v. Brackeen*, which had been argued before the Court in November, 2022. The Brackeens were a white couple who had adopted a Navajo boy and wanted to adopt his half sister, too. They had filed suit to challenge the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, which made it difficult for outsiders to adopt a Native American child. They argued that the law was unconstitutional, because it discriminated on the basis of race. The Indian Child Welfare Act was a response to the removal of as many as a third of Native American children from their families, to be placed in deracinating boarding schools (a guiding motto was “Kill the Indian, save the man”) and, later, in the mid-twentieth century, in adoptive homes. Angela knew that Native Americans were a special case, but she thought it was possible that *Haaland v. Brackeen* would lead people to think differently about transracial adoption in general.

She had started to push against it in her work, but it was going to be difficult. In the early nineteen-seventies, at the time of the National Association of Black Social Workers manifesto, transracial adoption was rare—adoptions of Black children by white parents made up about one per cent of all adoptions. Now it was widespread—more than half of Black adoptees were

adopted by non-Black families. “I was consulting with this white woman who wants to adopt, and she was, like, I don’t think I’m the best person to adopt a Black kid,” she said. “And I was, like, Great, tell your agency. This is the struggle, nothing will change until you stick by your principles. But white people are not going to do that, because white guilt starts to come out.”  
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For decades, agencies had been constrained by the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act, which restricted how agencies could consider race in placements, but now some were pushing back. Bethany Christian Services had issued a statement that the act should be overhauled and race should be considered in adoption. Angela had consulted for one agency in Indiana which asked white people seeking to adopt children of color whether they lived in a racially diverse town, had identified a school in that town with both teachers of color and white teachers, and had found a multiracial church.

All of this seemed good to Angela; but what would happen to a Black child if an agency couldn’t find it a Black family, as had happened with her? There were twenty-five thousand Black kids in foster care whose parents’ rights had been terminated—what about them? Now that Angela had met her Black relatives, she saw that her birth father’s family could have raised her—agencies didn’t try nearly hard enough to find fathers. But her situation, having been given up for adoption, was unusual: the rate of never-married Black women voluntarily relinquishing babies had been close to zero for decades. Many of the Black kids in foster care were there not because their parents had given them up but because they had been taken from parents who very much wanted them, by child-protective services. And most of those children had been removed not because of abuse but due to “neglect,” which could mean a lot of things—unsafe housing, not enough food, leaving kids home alone, missing doctors’ appointments—that were often consequences of poverty. So was adoption a way for those kids to have permanent families? Or was it the escape valve that allowed the child-protection system to continue removing children from their parents without fully reckoning with the cost? It was both.

Joy now has a private therapy practice in Scarsdale, New York, consisting of adoptees and adoptive parents. About fifteen years ago, she took on a second job, as a counsellor at Juilliard. In her private practice, she sees patients in a quiet, dark room in the basement of a church.

Adoptees are overrepresented in therapy. Some worry that they might be unknowingly attracted to a relative and commit incest. Some are jealous of their own children—jealous of their own love. Some adoptees of color have had the experience, even years after growing up in a white family, of catching sight of themselves in a mirror or a shop window and thinking, *Who’s that?* Many adoptees have a persistent sense that they don’t exist, or aren’t real, or aren’t human—that they weren’t born from a woman but came from nowhere, or from space. Some picture themselves being birthed by a building—the hospital that was recorded on their paperwork.

“There were some international adoptees who said, *My life began at J.F.K.,*” Joy said. “Even if you know cognitively that’s not true, no one can prove to you that it’s not true. If, for the time before you landed in J.F.K., if the paperwork is inaccurate, if the story is falsified, if there are no witnesses, if there’s no documentation, there are no photographs, nothing—that can really fuck people up.” Some adoptees felt that way even when there was no missing time. “I remember working with a domestic adoptee whose parents were in the delivery room at the time of their birth, and they were literally handed over by the birth mother,” she said. “I met them when they were a teen-ager. They actually had by that time reunited with their birth mother, and all they

talked about was, I have no idea who I am, I feel like I'm walking around with a mask on my face."

She didn't know why this was so, but that patient was far from the only one. "There's one theory that if the birth mother knew she was going to relinquish, is there an intrauterine hormonal shift that begins to—were there different kinds of hormones that flowed in the amniotic fluid? Maybe." It was known that cortisol levels in the amniotic fluid rose if the mother was experiencing prolonged stress. "Should the handoff have been so easy? Should the mother have nursed the baby? At what point did the baby feel, Wait a minute, this isn't right, I'm missing something? Could it be that the adoptive parents had intense years of infertility, and was the adoptive mom depressed and maybe not really attaching to the baby, even though she desperately wanted it? There are so many factors we don't know."

Perhaps because she had lived with her mother for the first three years of her life, she did not have that feeling that she didn't exist, but she felt something similar. "Loneliness feels more accurate to describe my experience," she said. "One minute I'm here, the next minute I'm there—these leaps of time and space and cultures, there's nothing that connects it. There are swaths of time that don't exist in my consciousness, and don't exist in anyone's consciousness. My birth mother only knows me from zero to three. There is no person that can account for my entire existence."

Over the years, Joy had tried to build a relationship with her birth mother, but it wasn't easy. They sometimes texted each other on a group chat with her brother, but the texts felt formal and generic—good wishes and emojis. Joy felt that she was still basically a stranger.

In 2008, her birth mother and brother came to stay with her and her husband and two kids in their small apartment. She thought they would come for maybe four weeks, but they stayed for three months. She had heard from other adoptees that their birth mothers were nosy and couldn't stop touching them, but her mother was the opposite. She was quiet and passive. She didn't seem curious about anything. Even though by that point Joy's Korean was very good, Joy found she couldn't talk to her. She still barely looked at her. All that had been O.K. when Joy paid her short visits in Korea, but when they were crowded in together for that long in her own space it made her furious. One day, she blew up. She said, You have been living in my house for six weeks and you haven't asked me a single question. You don't want to know anything about me. Her mother started to cry. She said, You are out of my life. I just wanted to know where you were.

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When her mother left to go back to Korea, Joy was glad to see her go. She didn't really feel like staying in touch, but she figured she would do so for her kids' sake. In the years after the visit, she reconciled herself to their relationship being what it was. Now all she wanted was to sit with her mother one more time without asking for anything. "I don't need any more clarity on the past," she said. "I'm perfectly fine with going out to dinner. I can't— The ship has passed of trying to get her to understand me."

Although she felt no closer to her birth mother, Joy did feel more Korean. There were a lot of Koreans in her neighborhood, and her spoken Korean was good enough now that she could chat with mothers on the playground and they never knew she was not as Korean as they were. They would ask her if she celebrated Thanksgiving, and were surprised that she knew about

pumpkin pie. When she walked down the street with her husband now, she thought, We are a full Korean couple. It was weird. She had always felt more like an adoptee than anything else.

As she grew older, and fewer and fewer children were adopted from Korea, she realized that at some point the small culture she was part of would die out. “It’s just a matter of time,” she said. “In the long history of humanity, we will exist only in a span of sixty or seventy years.” She felt that she had to keep talking about that experience or it would all be lost. She had been interviewed on video as part of KoreanAmericanStory.org’s Legacy Project, and for the Side by Side project, both extensive film archives of Korean adoptees telling the stories of their lives. She had created an online adoptee community, IAMAdoptee.org.

She had heard that several hundred Korean adoptees, led by a Korean Danish lawyer, were demanding that the Korean government investigate how they had come to be adopted—if government orphanages had lied about whether they had families, or falsified their paperwork, making them harder to find. But she knew that most of her fellows weren’t interested in the history of Korean adoptions the way she was. None of her three sisters had tried to find their birth parents, or had even been to Korea. This was normal. Even the largest Korean adoptee group on Facebook had only about seven thousand members, and if you added others you got maybe twice that. But about two hundred thousand Korean children had been adopted overseas. Where was everybody else?

Soon, all that would remain of those couple of hundred thousand Korean children would be some documents that would end up in libraries, dissertations, and family albums. “How many adoptees in my generation were plastered on the Living section of their local newspaper?” she said. “Probably thousands of us. We were the sensation of the town. We all have a newspaper clipping of the arrival of the children from Korea. And in it the parents are happy and the babies all look traumatized. I look at my arrival pictures now, and I’m just, like, that poor kid—no one explained to her what the hell’s going on.”

When she thought now about that bewildered child at the airport in 1976 in her peacock dress, her nose all bloody, she found that she thought about her in the third person. “I don’t really think about this as me anymore,” she said. “I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t think I can think about it in the first person, because I think that would. . . .” She paused. “She’s had to stay in the past,” she said. “I don’t know that I could bring her here.” ♦

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