

# The New York Times Magazine

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'HER  
CHOICE  
WAS  
NO  
CHOICE  
AT  
ALL



A generation of Korean adoptees is going home — and challenging the ethics of international adoption.

BY MAGGIE JONES

**THE**

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# **E RETURNED**

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A generation of adoptees brought up in America is moving back to South Korea — and raising soul-searching questions about international adoption.

BY MAGGIE JONES / Photographs by Mark Neville



# LAURA

Klunder's newest tattoo runs down the inside of her left forearm and reads "K85-160," a number that dates to her infancy. Klunder was 9 months old when her South Korean mother left her at a police station in Seoul. The police brought her to Holt Children's Services, a local adoption agency, where a worker assigned Klunder the case number K85-160. It was only two weeks into 1985, but she was already the 160th child to come to the agency that month, and she would go on to be one of 8,800 children sent overseas from South Korea that year. Klunder became part of the largest adoption exodus from one country in history: Over the past six decades, at least 200,000 Korean children — roughly the population of Des Moines — have been adopted into families in more than 15 countries, with a vast majority living in the United States.

Klunder, who is 30, has a warm goofiness and a tendency toward self-deprecation. ("I was the chubby kid with glasses wearing Lisa Frank T-shirts," she said, shaking her head at the memory of her middle-school self.) But she also resonates intensity. She chose the tattoo of her case number as a critique of adoption, she told me. "I was a transaction. I was a number in the same way that people who are criminalized and institutionalized are given numbers."

Klunder, who was raised in Wisconsin, moved back to South Korea in 2011, which is where I met her one night last February along with three of her friends, all adoptees from the United States. We were at a restaurant in the Hongdae section of Seoul, known for its galleries, bars and cheap restaurants. Outside, the streets teemed with university students, musicians, artists and clubbers. The neighborhood is also a popular spot for the approximately 300 to 500 adoptees who have moved to South Korea — primarily from the United States but also from France, Denmark and other nations. Most lack fluency in the language and possess no memories of the country they left when they were young. But they are back, hoping for a sense of connection — to South Korea, to their birth families, to other adoptees.

That night, Klunder and her friends passed plates of *bibimbap* (rice topped with meat and vegetables), *soondubu jjigae* (tofu stew) and *pa jun* (scallion pancake) around the table and ordered bottles of beer and *soju*. Everyone there was a member of Adoptee Solidarity Korea, or ASK. It was started as a reading group in 2004 by a handful of politically progressive Korean female adoptees (and one man) in their 30s, who began to discuss why Korean single mothers felt pressure to give away their children — 90 percent of those who place their children for adoption are not married. They talked about a culture in which single mothers are often ostracized, one in which employers typically ask women about their marital status in job interviews; parents sometimes reject daughters who raise their children alone; and the children of single mothers are often bullied in school. They also questioned why the government offered little aid to mothers to help keep their families intact. At an adoption conference organized a year after the group was created, members handed out fliers that read, in part, "ASK stands in opposition to international adoption." They sold T-shirts, designed by Kimura Byol-Nathalie Lemoine, an early adoptee activist, that depicted a wailing baby with a large stamp on its rear end: "Made in Korea."

Over time, ASK backed away from its message of ending adoption. It was too polarizing, adoptees said, and "hard for people to hear anything we said after the word 'stop,'" Jenny Na, one of the group's founders,

wrote in a history of ASK. But in recent years, members — along with other Korean adoptee activists — have built an improbable political campaign, lobbying for legislation that has helped reduce the flow of Korean children overseas. In the process, they have emerged as leaders in a movement to question the very concept of international adoption, one that has galvanized other adoptees around the world.

Some of those leaders, including Klunder and her friend Kim Stoker, who was also at dinner that night, want to stanch the flow of Korean children entirely. "I get parents' desperation to have children," said Stoker, who at 41 was the oldest of the group at the table. "Accepting diverse families is great," she said. But, she added, "I don't think it's normal adopting a child from another country, of another race and paying a lot of money. I don't think it's normal to put a child on a plane away from all its kin and different smells. It's a very modern phenomenon."

Neither Klunder nor Stoker believes international adoption will stop in South Korea any time soon. But ending it is what they want. As Klunder put it, "Our goal is to make ourselves extinct."

**In 1954, a couple** from Oregon, Bertha and Harry Holt, went to a local auditorium to watch a presentation by World Vision, the Christian relief organization, on Korean War orphans. At the time, South Korea was hobbling to recover from its brutal war with North Korea. "We had never seen such emaciated arms and legs," wrote Bertha, a nurse and fundamentalist Christian who wore round wire glasses, "such wistful little faces looking for someone to care." Federal law prohibited families from adopting more than two children from abroad. But in 1955, the two senators from Oregon sponsored the Bill for Relief of Certain Korean War Orphans, which Congress passed specifically to allow the Holts to adopt four boys and four girls. Reports of Harry Holt, a farmer and lumberjack, coming home with eight children appeared in newspapers around the country, and soon prospective parents flooded the Holts with letters, saying that they, too, wanted to adopt war orphans. Within a year, the couple had established the Holt Adoption Program in the United States (followed later by a Holt agency in South Korea), the first and still one of the biggest international-adoption agencies.

During the '50s, most children available for adoption were of mixed race — "the dust of the streets," as they were called — whose fathers were American and U.N. soldiers. Some of them had turned up at orphanages, lost or abandoned; in the postwar chaos, it was unclear if their parents were still alive. But in other cases, mothers relinquished their mixed-race babies because they feared that their families would be treated as outcasts.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the country had industrialized and urbanized rapidly; divorce and teenage-pregnancy rates climbed. Poor and working-class single women with babies struggled with little, or no, support from the government. Most of the children placed for adoption at the time were fully Korean. In the meantime, the number of babies available for adoption in the United States in the 1970s dropped, as birth-control was more readily available, abortion was legalized and single motherhood became more socially acceptable.

South Korea, by this point, had passed the Special Adoption Law, which created a legal framework for adoptions and approved four agencies to process those adoptions. From the beginning, though, there were problems. Adoption paperwork was sometimes fraudulent — a grandmother or an aunt might give up a baby without the mother's consent (while she was working or looking for work), because they thought the mother and the child would be better off. Agency workers often didn't verify information — about a child's

Previous page:  
Laura Klunder in Seoul.  
She had her adoption  
case number tattooed  
on her arm.

Right:  
Jane Jeong Trenka and  
Luke McQueen, who  
were raised by adoptive  
parents in the United  
States, now live  
with their daughter in  
Chungbuk Province.

# LAURA

health or age, or whether the mother had truly consented to adoption—in order to expedite the process. Eleana Kim, associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, and author of “Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging,” explained that though most women weren’t directly paid, adoption agencies set up homes for unwed pregnant women and took care of medical expenses with the expectation that the women would agree to have their babies sent overseas. Workers at adoption agencies sometimes told mothers that they would be selfish to keep their children, who would thrive in affluent, two-parent households in the United States. In the 1980s, adoption became big business, bringing millions of dollars to Korean agencies. The government benefited, too. For each child South Korea sent away, it had one fewer child to feed.

By 1985, the year Klunder arrived in the United States, South Korea had earned the reputation as the Cadillac of adoption programs because of its efficient system and steady supply of healthy babies. The number of adoptions reached unsettling heights, with an average of 24 children leaving South Korea each day. The continued growth was all the more striking because South Korea’s economy had improved significantly. That year, its G.D.P. ranked 20th globally, just below Switzerland’s, and continued to climb over the next decade. During NBC’s coverage of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, when the world saw a newly democratic country lined with skyscrapers and freshly paved highways, Bryant Gumbel noted that South Korea preferred to keep quiet about its “exportation” of babies. North Korea also criticized its neighbor for its liberal adoption policies.

Embarrassed, the South Korean government promised to reduce international adoptions, in part by providing subsidies and extra health care benefits to South Korean families who adopted. But the government showed far less interest in helping single mothers keep their babies.

People in the United States, meanwhile, began adopting from all over the world. Though only 7,000 children were adopted into the United States in 1990, by 2004—the peak of international adoption—that number had risen to 23,000, with children arriving from China, Russia, Guatemala, South Korea, Ukraine, Colombia, Ethiopia and dozens of other countries.

I was among that wave of adoptive parents. After several miscarriages, my husband and I adopted two children—one domestically, one internationally. We chose domestic adoption initially because we longed for a newborn and wanted an open adoption, in which children and birth families can remain in contact. (Studies suggest that open adoption—far more common in the United States than in international adoptions—is psychologically more healthful for adoptees and birthparents.) In 2003, our older daughter, who is part Japanese and part African, was born in California, where we lived.

But by the time we signed up to adopt again a couple of years later, my husband and I were in our early 40s, and we feared that another domestic adoption could take years. Instead we looked to Guatemala, where adoptions often occurred more quickly and most children lived in foster homes, receiving more one-on-one attention than in orphanages. Unlike in China and many other countries, in Guatemala, adoptive families could also meet birth families during the process and stay connected afterward through photos, letters and visits.

I began scouting agencies with the most ethical reputations. I heard repeatedly—though mostly from agencies and other parents—that there were safeguards (DNA tests of mothers and children; social-worker interviews with birth mothers) to protect adoptive and birth families. But almost as soon as I arrived at the Westin Hotel in Guatemala City to finalize the adoption of our daughter, I felt queasy. Everywhere, it seemed, there were lawyers and agency representatives handing over brown-skinned babies, born to impoverished mothers, to white, wealthy parents

— some of whom might never return to Guatemala again, who might make no effort to encourage a link between their adopted children and their country or their birth families. My husband and I were eager not to be “those parents.” When the adoption was complete, instead of leaving the country, we drove with our daughters to a nearby city, where we spent several days. One night at a restaurant, a well-dressed Guatemalan man in his 50s or 60s passed my new daughter and me and muttered, “There goes another baby taken from our country.”

His comment might have referred to corruption: It would become increasingly clear that Guatemala’s adoption system was, like those in Ethiopia, Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere, plagued with illegal payments, coercion of birth mothers and in some cases outright stealing of babies. (Guatemala’s program shut down seven years ago.) Or maybe he was thinking about the fact that birth mothers, typically indigenous women who faced



## TO MAKE OURSELVES EXTINCT, ONE ADOPTEE SAYS.

discrimination, had little access to counseling and no official waiting period after birth during which to change their minds. He may have been imagining what would happen if the thousands of dollars each family handed over to their adoption agency was used instead to help children stay in Guatemala. And then there was the issue that Kim Stoker has since raised: Should adopted children be brought up by people of a different race?

"No parent wants their child to be discriminated against," Stoker told me one night in Seoul. "But I think as a white parent in a white society — even if you're in a multicultural neighborhood — you can't protect your child when your child walks out the door. You provide all these economic resources, but there are all these other things that you haven't experienced as a white person."

My husband and I are of a generation that is supposedly savvier and better educated about raising adopted children. We have done some of the "right things": traveled with our kids back to Guatemala and to Japan (where my older daughter's birth mother lives). We've advocated for open adoptions (with mixed success) so our daughters would have access to their records and contact with their families. Our daughters' friends and their school are diverse. And my husband and I try not to shy away from talking about the complexities of adoption and race.

Still, my daughters don't see themselves reflected in my and my husband's faces. They will confront racism in their lives, which neither my husband nor I ever have. My children are happy and deeply attached to us. But while the predominant narrative of adoption focuses on what is gained, each adoption also entails loss for both the child and her biological family. It's a loss I can't fully know and one I can never entirely heal.

Perhaps that's what the Guatemalan man meant when he saw me with my daughter. I had love and financial advantages to offer her. But she was yet another child who,

through no choice of her own, was leaving her biological family, her country and her culture behind.

Before Laura Klunder left South Korea as a child, she lived with a foster family with whom she learned to take tentative steps holding an adult's hand. She could say "omma" (mommy) and understood other Korean words. Then on April 27, 1985, nine days after her first birthday, she boarded a Korean Airlines flight with an escort provided by the Holt agency and flew 6,500 miles to Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

In Franklin, Wis., a largely white suburb of Milwaukee, Klunder attended a Lutheran school where she was taunted by one boy for years: "Why is your skin so dirty?" "You look like a black Barbie." "Did you fall in the mud?" Her parents had good intentions and, Klunder says, "were loving in more ways than they were not." But they didn't acknowledge how central race was in their daughter's life. "My parents told me they didn't see color," Klunder said. "They couldn't engage on that level."

When I recently talked to her mother, she said: "I could see how upsetting certain things were to Laura. But I said, 'You can't let these things bother you so much; there will also be people like that in the world.'" When the issue of adoption came up, Klunder's mother told her that her birth mother loved her very much but that God had a different plan for her. As a teenager, furious that her parents didn't understand her feelings and experiences, Klunder repeatedly lashed out at them. They were angry, too. When she was in high school, Klunder told me, her father would say: "I didn't sign up for this. Send her back." (He says he remembers saying something like that only once.)

This was in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when adoption experts had already shifted from telling parents to "assimilate" their adopted children, instead encouraging them to talk openly about adoption, to acknowledge racial differences and to embrace their children's birth culture. Some parents signed up for "homeland tours" to Korea or sent their children to Korean summer "culture camp," where kids gathered in the woods of Minnesota or California to study the Korean alphabet, dance to Korean pop music and learn taekwondo.

Klunder's family occasionally ate dinner with friends who had adopted Korean children, and they attended an annual Korean adoptee picnic near Chicago. Klunder felt ambivalent about it. The food was delicious, and the Korean women who danced in their *hanboks* were beautiful, but she didn't identify as Korean. "They were telling me this is my culture, but I didn't see myself in that traditional dress and tight bun." And though she knew one other Korean adoptee as a child, by the time Klunder was a teenager — when difference is a stigma most kids work to avoid — "I wanted nothing to do with adoptees."

In a 2009 survey of adult adoptees by the Donaldson Adoption Institute, more than 75 percent of the 179 Korean respondents who grew up with two white parents said they thought of themselves as white or wanted to be white when they were children. Most also said they had experienced racial discrimination, including from teachers. Only a minority said they felt welcomed by members of their own ethnic group. The report recommended that parents do more than just celebrate multiculturalism or sign up for culture camp. Adoptees should have "lived" experiences related to adoption and race: traveling to birth countries, attending racially diverse schools. Those things might have helped, Klunder says, but only if she had parents who were willing to be honest about racism. "You need parents who can talk about white privilege, who can say: 'You might experience some of this. I'm sorry. We are in this together.'"

In college, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Klunder found a group of like-minded friends and joined the multicultural



student coalition. After receiving a master's degree in social work, she took a job at Macalester College in Minnesota, advising minority and feminist groups and working on the school's response to sexual assault. Her immersion in those issues served only to make fights with her parents more disheartening. "I knew that I was the only person of color in their life, and it was too easy for them to invalidate my point of view as another 'anger issue.'" At some point, she said, "I felt hopeless to create change in my adoptive family."

Eight years ago, she stopped talking to them, though she says she hopes that will change one day. Her mother, who misses her daughter, said: "I'm sorry for anything we didn't do correctly for her. But we didn't know how she felt. I couldn't get her to talk about anything important or what was inside her."

**Benjamin Hauser**  
near the farm in Daegu  
where he lived as  
a foster child until he  
was about 5.

In the summer of 2010, when Klunder was 26, she went to Seoul to join more than 500 other Korean adoptees from around the world for an annual event known as the

Gathering. For many — some of whom never had Korean adopted friends before — it was a heady experience. They ate together, drank together; some stumbled back late at night into hotel rooms together. They spoke in shorthand about their American lives, sharing their stories about being told by strangers that their English was very good and about meeting men who assumed that Asian women were up for anything in bed.

Klunder skipped the bars. She was too nervous to perform at *nori bong* (Korea's version of karaoke) or to get naked with other adoptees at the *jjimjilbangs* (Korean saunas). Instead she stayed up late talking with a couple of other women. During the day, conference sessions delved into everything from searching for birthparents to the isolation of single mothers. Then Klunder heard Kim Stoker give a lecture about learning the Korean language as an avenue to "belonging" in South Korea. Raised in Utah, Stoker has lived in South Korea for 15 years and has the maternal presence of someone who has held the hands of many 20-something adoptees during their first months in Seoul. Living there is the most meaningful thing she has done in her life, she says. "We didn't have a choice about what happened to us," she told me, referring to adoptees

being taken from their country. "So to come back, to live on your own terms..." she said. "I do really feel like these are my kin." By the end of Stoker's talk, Klunder felt, as she put it, "invited to come back." And before leaving South Korea that week, she decided that she would return to live there.

Over the year that followed in Minneapolis, Klunder was anxious about her impending move to a country where she had no friends, no employment and no fluency in the language. Still she quit her job and said goodbye to the boyfriend she loved ("an anti-racist white man," as she described him). She packed one large suitcase with clothes and two carry-ons with shoes, handbags and books, including works by Gabriel García Márquez, Saul Alinsky, Bell Hooks, along with South Korean adoption memoirs. Then she flew back to her birth country on a one-way ticket.

**By the time** Klunder moved in 2011, Seoul had become home to hundreds of returning adoptees. The Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, the largest and longest-running adoptee group in Korea, made it easier for adoptees to live in the country — helping them find language classes and translation services and organizing social events. Most important, GOA'L, as the group is known, successfully lobbied the government to offer adoptees F-4 visas, which allow them to live and work in the country indefinitely. Now adoptees can also apply to become dual citizens.

Like many before her, Klunder spent some of her early days at KoRoot, an adoptee-only guesthouse in Seoul with cheap rooms and communal meals, run by Pastor Kim Do-hyun, along with his wife, Kong Jungae. At the two-story brick-and-stone house, Kim encourages new arrivals not only to explore Seoul but also to think about the larger political issues around their adoptions. In the '90s, as a pastor in Switzerland, Kim began working with adoptees after one committed suicide, leaving a

note that said, "I'm going to meet my birth mother." Later, as a graduate student in theology, Kim wrote his master's thesis on birth mothers.

In 2008, Kim and his staff from KoRoot joined forces with the organization Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea and one of its founders, Jane Jeong Trenka, to try to amend South Korea's adoption law to help discourage overseas adoption. Kim and Trenka, who was raised in rural Minnesota and returned to South Korea in 2004 to be closer to her birth family, spent three years meeting with public-interest lawyers, government officials, nonadoptee activists and a member of Parliament, Choi Young-hee, who agreed to sponsor the amendment. ASA and two other groups, Dandelions (a group of Korean birthparents who had placed their children for adoption) and Kumfa (an organization for single mothers), joined the effort as well. They lobbied government officials, wrote and rewrote the proposal's language and drew attention to their cause by installing a piece of artwork in a government building, featuring 60,000 hanging paper price tags inscribed with the names of Korean adoptees.

In August 2012, they succeeded in enacting an amendment to the adoption law, implementing curbs on adoption that would have seemed unthinkable decades ago. Women must now receive counseling and wait seven days before placing a child for adoption. All adoptions must be registered through the courts, which gives adoptees, who often struggle to make contact with their families (only a small percentage of Korean adoptees who search for birth families ever find them), an avenue for tracing their history.

Detractors say the law now creates too many hurdles for women who genuinely want to put their babies up for adoption and slows the process. Since the law was passed, the number of abandoned babies has increased — though whether that's a direct result is unclear. They also note that Koreans are generally not comfortable "raising another's child," as Koreans say, and finding adoptive families can be difficult. (Some Korean families who are willing to adopt keep it a secret.) Adoption supporters in the

© HOMING SIGNALS Additional photographs of adoptees who have returned to South Korea are at [nytimes.com/magazine](http://nytimes.com/magazine).



United States and elsewhere question the very idea of making adoption more restrictive around the world, especially in deeply impoverished countries, where birth control and abortion are taboo and there is little government will to help children, including those who languish in orphanages.

For better or worse, the amendment seems to be having its desired impact in South Korea: Adoptions to other countries, already on the decline since the 1980s — hovering around 1,000 a year between 2007 and 2012 — dropped to 263 in 2013. The activists also see the amendment as an acknowledgment that their views matter. "The law incorporates the opinions of the people actually affected — adoptees.

Amanda Eunha Lovell, center, in Hongdae, close to where she attends a graduate program at Hongik University.



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unwed mothers," said Trenka, who is 42 and now a mother herself; she and her partner, Luke McQueen, a 43-year-old Korean adoptee from Colorado, have a 3-month-old daughter. "And it's proof that Korean adoptees can be taken seriously and effect change."

For Trenka and other Korean activists, their engagement with these issues extends beyond Korea's borders. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Trenka publicly warned that adoptions from Haiti were vulnerable to the same sorts of problems — fraudulent paperwork; children designated as orphans when their parents were alive — that existed in postwar Korea. Kim Stoker joined other adoptees from around the world issuing a statement protesting the "fast tracking" by the U.S. government of Haitian adoptions.

More recently, Trenka, along with Vietnamese, Indian, Ethiopian and Colombian adoptees, criticized a bill before the United States Congress last year that aimed to make international adoption easier. They argued that adoptees were not consulted about the bill and said — along with Holt International Children's Services, which publicly opposed it — that it would eliminate adoption safeguards and reallocate foreign aid from international programs that help children.

Trenka has also met with activists from other countries, including Jenna Cook, an adoptee from China. Last year, she came to South Korea for a conference and talked to Trenka about adoptee rights. A recent graduate of Yale, Cook is one of more than 100,000 children adopted from China since the early '90s, the second-largest group of international adoptees. She and other adoptees want the Chinese government to respond the way South Korea has and offer F-4 visas so they can return for the long term. "It's important that we are recognized as a diaspora," Cook says. "We are going to come back as highly educated middle-class Europeans and Americans, with brain power and economic capital."

While some Chinese adoptees are now in their 20s, those from other countries tend to be much younger. Since the late 1990s, roughly 29,000 children from Guatemala and 14,000 from Ethiopia have been adopted into the United States. Most of them have yet to reach high school. Compared with Korea — a democracy and a developed country — Guatemala, China and Ethiopia may prove less welcoming, at least for now. But as adoptees grow up, Korean activists hope that they will demand more information about their histories and the adoption process from agencies and governments. Perhaps cities like Beijing, Antigua in Guatemala or Addis Ababa in Ethiopia — already popular destinations for adoptees and their families — may become their own mini-adoptee communities and centers of activism against international adoption.

**Around 8 p.m.** on a chilly Saturday night last February, more than a dozen adoptees gathered at several pushed-together metal tables at Hongik Sotbul Kalbi, a Korean BBQ restaurant in Seoul. The room filled with conversation and smoke from meat sizzling on open grills. Nights like this are a fixture of adoptee life in South Korea, flowing from BBQ or *bibimbap* restaurants to a bar for *soju* and beer, to another bar, culminating with singing at a *nori bong* — till 2 or 3 or 4 a.m. That night the gathering included a woman in her 20s, who moved to Seoul a week earlier, and others — from California and Utah, from New York and Massachusetts — who had lived in South Korea anywhere from six to 10 years. Several at the table weren't involved in adoption politics — or even especially interested in it. Adoptee socializing in Seoul often divides along political lines. Hollee McGinnis, whom I met the day before, was one of several people who told me that the most ardent adoption critics make some adoptees uncomfortable. "If you're pro-adoption, you can feel Pollyannaish," said McGinnis, a former policy director at the Donaldson Adoption Institute, who is researching her dissertation in Seoul on mental health and educational outcomes for children growing up in orphanages. "I'm not an advocate or detractor of adoption. I see it as a choice and a trade-off with relative losses and gains."

**'KOREA IS  
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**COMFORTABLE**

At the barbecue dinner, Benjamin Hauser said he shared this view. "I understand there could be potential problems with adoption, but I know positive cases too." Hauser, who is 36 and has lived in South Korea since 2004, is a manager at an English-language school and is writing a children's adventure book featuring Korean adoptees. Unlike many adoptees, he remembers his early life in South Korea: He lived with a foster family for five years and spent two years in an orphanage before being adopted by a couple in Rochester. His parents then adopted two more boys from South Korea.

Throughout their childhood, he and his brothers had a fairly diverse group of friends, and their father, a professor of Japanese history, cooked Korean food and took the kids to Korean restaurants. At the end of high school, when his parents asked Benjamin if he would like to go to Paris or Seoul for his graduation, he picked Paris. "I grew up as an American," said Hauser, who wears a small earring and has spiked hair that juts out in several directions. "My parents are Caucasian. I didn't identify as Korean. I wasn't mature enough to realize I could explore that side." Before moving to Seoul, he never had an Asian girlfriend. "It was part of my feeling of wanting to be white."

Ten years ago, when he was working as a manager at Otis Elevator Company in Albany, he realized "this job would be the rest of my life — and something was missing." He remembered his goal when he was in the orphanage — to return to the dairy farm where he lived with his Korean family. (He later learned that it was his foster family; he has never found his birth family.)

But he feared that searching for his Korean roots was a betrayal of his adoptive parents. "I thought they might say, 'We were the ones who took care of you; why do you feel like you need to look for your foster family?'"

Eleana Kim, the author of "Adopted Territory," says it's a common anxiety among adoptees who often (Continued on Page 51)

dread “coming out” to their parents — whether it’s in the form of birth-family searches, returning to birth countries or criticizing the adoption system.

In Hauser’s case, his parents were not upset. “I was mostly worried that he might get hurt,” his mother, Susan Hauser, told me, referring to adoptees who can’t find their families or discover the families don’t want to be found. “But he was an adult, and it was his decision.” She and her ex-husband also supported his move to South Korea. Benjamin’s father, William Hauser, said: “I understand how parents feel it’s a rejection, but I don’t feel it at all. In a sense I’m much closer to him since he’s been in Korea.” He and Susan Hauser are in a tiny minority of parents who visit their children each year — their son Zack also lives in Seoul, where he’s a chef.

Instead it was Benjamin’s middle brother, Aaron, who was offended — at least at first — by how much his brother loved South Korea. “I thought Ben’s Korean pride diminished his American pride,” he told me recently. That changed when Aaron visited Seoul, took Korean classes and hung out with Benjamin’s friends. He realized that spending more time there made him feel “more Korean,” and that was gratifying.

Though Benjamin and his brothers feel close to their parents, many adoptees told me that closeness isn’t the only relevant issue. “It’s not just about me and my personal experience,” said Amy Mihyang Ginther, a voice coach who wrote and starred in a one-woman play that she performed in Seoul and other cities, taking on personas of adoptees and birth mothers.

Growing up near Albany, Ginther attended playgroups with other Korean adoptees and culture camp, which she loved. When Ginther was bullied in school — kids called her Chinese and Japanese and said her parents couldn’t be her “real” parents — her adoptive mother came to speak to the class about Korean culture and adoption, with Amy as her co-teacher. But her love for her parents didn’t keep her from longing to connect to her birth family and to South Korea. In 2004, she reunited with her birth mother (her adoptive father came with her on the trip). Then two years later, she visited again, living with her birth family for a month. (Her Korean mother was so protective, she barely let her outside the house.) In 2009, she moved to South Korea and has lived there on and off since. Ginther, who is 31, now sees her birth mother about every other month in Seoul or in her birth mother’s hometown, Gimcheon, a couple of hours south of the city.

“My life in the United States, no matter how good it was,” she told me one day over lunch, “never made up for my *omma’s* grief.” As Ginther understands the story, her parents were struggling financially when she was born, the

## ADOPTEES OFTEN FEEL CLOSE TO THEIR PARENTS, BUT MANY SAY CLOSENESS ISN'T THE ONLY RELATIVE ISSUE. 'IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT ME AND MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE,' ONE SAID.

youngest of three daughters. Her father told her mother that he would leave her if she didn’t relinquish Amy. (He later left anyway.) “Her choice,” Ginther said of her birth mother, “was no choice at all.”

Adoptees, of course, also had no choice, and many resent the idea that they should simply be grateful — that they are somehow better off than they otherwise would be. As Trenka writes in her memoir, “The Language of Blood”: “How can I weigh the loss of my language and culture against the freedom that America has to offer, the opportunity to have the same rights as a man? How can a person exiled as a child, without a choice, possibly fathom how he would have ‘turned out’ had he stayed in Korea? How many educational opportunities must I mark on my tally sheet before I can say it was worth losing my mother? How can an adoptee weigh her terrible loss against the burden of gratitude she feels she has for her adoptive country and parents?”

As I talked to dozens of adoptees in Seoul about what drew them back, the conversation, inevitably, shifted to what might push them to leave. For many, the experience of living in Seoul veers between warm familiarity and occasional alienation. (A different version of growing up as an Asian adoptee in a white family in the United States.) “Korea is home,” Amanda Eunha Lovell, told me. “But it’s not one I’m completely comfortable in.”

Lovell, who is 36, teaches English to elementary-school children and is a graduate student working on a documentary about adoptees returning to South Korea. She grew up in Ipswich, Mass., and has lived in Seoul for six years. She has an advantage over many adoptees: She speaks Korean fairly well, which makes her feel more at home. But like every other adoptee, she has had to adjust to different social norms, including Koreans’ well-intentioned bluntness, especially when it comes to women: How old are you? Are you married?

Are you tired? Why don’t you wear more makeup?

Lovell doesn’t know if she’d be willing to raise children in South Korea, with its hypercompetitive school system. In addition, many women told me that they may leave because of the dearth of romantic partners. Male adoptees have it easier — they are seen as more masculine than they are in the United States — and live in a “frat culture,” as one woman told me, filled with drinking and a wide choice of women: adoptees, other expats and “Korean Koreans,” as native Koreans are called.

Lovell was one of the very few female adoptees I heard about with a Korean boyfriend. He’s a musician who tells her he is “not a typical Korean guy.” Still, “he scolds me, saying, ‘You should be doing this,’” she said, imitating a paternal voice. Laura Klunder also pointed out the various gender roles are ingrained in daily life: Female adoptees are often viewed as masculine when they wear clunky shoes and carry their own bags of groceries — a sharp contrast to the young Korean women in high heels, short skirts and meticulously applied layers of makeup. Koreans also consider it unladylike for women to smoke in public. And if a handyman arrives at a woman’s apartment to fix something, he will often ask to speak to the husband. “In the U.S., I feel my race,” Lovell said. “Here I feel my gender. This is what it must have been like in the United States during the ‘Mad Men’ era.”

For many adoptees, those cultural divides — coupled with the fact that they can’t speak the language, a frustrating and often heart-wrenching obstacle in their own birth country — solidifies the feeling that they hover in between: not fully American, not fully Korean. Instead, they live in a third space: Asian, Western, white, adopted, other. It’s a complicated place but not always a bad one. “I am, maybe, in a way, proud of my in-betweenness,” Lovell recently wrote me in an email.

It is a space I expect my children will share with Lovell, and with so many other adoptees. Both of my daughters’ birth families and their roots tug on their hearts. If they eventually decide to live in the countries of their birth mothers for a year or five years or more, I hope to support — even encourage — them. If living there fills some void, creates some peace, fosters a sense of belonging, how could I not want that for them?

In the years ahead, I also expect my kids will have tough questions for me. Perhaps they will ask why my husband and I thought we were equipped to raise a child of a different race. My youngest may ask why we chose international adoption. Did we understand its failures? Did we do anything to fix them?

I hope to answer without defensiveness — and with candor and empathy. I hope, too, that I remember two things may be true simultaneously: Our daughters’ love for us and their need to question why and how we became a family. ♦