

## THE KOREAN DROP

Have you ever heard about the dripping water torture, also known as "The Chinese water torture"?

- A small drop of water being repeatedly aimed towards the same place on the victim's forehead. Each drop in itself is not painful, but over time, since the drops hit the same spot over and over - the pain becomes unbearable. The systematic landing on one area only is why it is called torture as opposed to "only pain".

That's how I see my Korean ADOpatee (KAD) experience. I guess it can be called "Korean water torture". Or simply "The Korean drop".

My name is Sunny Jo, but it hasn't always been. At age one I was adopted from Korea to Norway. From one day to another, I was ripped away from everything familiar to me. Rice and kimchi was exchanged for meatballs and potatoes, and morning calm was traded with midnight sun. In a single moment, my path was changed, forever. And I can never go back and pretend it never happened.

I grew up as an only child. My Norwegian parents accepted me as their own, and tried their best to raise me as a "normal" Norwegian child. I grew up with Norwegian culture as my only point of reference, I was fluent in Norwegian language, and I had an all-Norwegian name. That I was Norwegian was just the way things were, no questions asked.

And my adoptive parents were so happy for having me, I was their solution to infertility. But that does not mean I have never doubted their love for me, nor their acceptance. I was their daughter from day one, and both in material terms, as well as in the area of love, care and attention, I never lacked anything. Through my arrival, they got the child and as a result the family they were dreaming about. Since most people have had individual "drops" fall on them occasionally in life, few truly understand the pain that constant dripping causes. Some even try to minimize or trivialize it by comparing it to heavy rainfall, or to falling in a pond, lake, or ocean - in other words, situations which cause a lot more wetness and soaking than the tiny drop.

Due to the fact that Norway has amongst the highest per capita number of Korean Adoptees in the world, I was never the only KAD around. "Everyone" knew someone who was or had adopted from Korea, and Korean ADOpatees were all around. Growing up a Korean ADOpatee in Norway ensured the complete assimilation into Norwegian society, and probably saved me much of the racism and stereotypes which other immigrants experienced.

There was however, a backside. As a result of the assumed benefits which I received from living a privileged and affluent life in Norway, people often pointed out how "lucky" I was for getting these opportunities. I was told I should feel grateful for being adopted. More than once was I patted on the cheek by old, well-meaning ladies who

told me how cute "my kind" was and asked me with pity in their voice if people had been nice to me. And both adults and children alike took the opportunity to remind me of the poverty and despair which existed abroad, and how privileged I was for getting to grow up in Norway instead. At the same time, they would highlight that I was Norwegian, and not an immigrant like the Vietnamese refugees or the Pakistani guest workers, once again emphasizing how "lucky" I was for being here.

To me, rainfall or falling in a body of water causes discomfort, even danger, which might be fatal in the end, BUT it does not cause the intense pain felt from the "drop". One of the most painful aspects of the "drop" is that there is no chance of escaping it. In other words, I am forced to live forever with the drop, which in addition is being both trivialized and is often invisible to the people around, who might unknowingly add to the dripping.

As a result of greater society's attitudes towards what was considered to be "foreign", I internalized the values and ideas which told me that life anywhere else than in Norway would have been inferior. My adoptive parents had been told by their adoption agency that I would not have had any chances of a decent life if I had remained in Korea. So being adopted was my only chance of happiness, and that I ended up in Norway was considered to be my lucky draw in life.

With the ideals of social equality and global solidarity being dominant, and the self-proclaimed open-mindedness of the supposedly "colour blind" majority, I grew up thinking that race and ethnicity did not matter. What they considered to be important, was that someone loved me and that the highly valued benefits of education and democracy were within my reach. And for a long time I believed that these myths were real. After all, everyone meant well, I was made to feel guilty if I questioned all their good intentions.

Still, it just never felt right. It took years before I could put the forbidden, difficult feelings into words, the feelings I had not even dared to acknowledge to myself. There simply was no room for my loneliness, racial isolation and feelings of alienation, as all the space was consumed by the happiness of my parents and society's colorblind conviction of having done "something good" by "saving" me. To show anything but gratefulness and satisfaction would be like slapping the face of both the adoptive parents who loved me, and the people who had accepted me as one of them. So I carried my pain alone, wearing a mask out of fear that I might destroy everyone else's illusion.

I know that no one will ever understand the torture, and yes, in many ways being a KAD has been emotional TORTURE, without themselves having experienced it. I know it will always be viewed as less painful than many of its alternatives by those who have not felt the pain themselves, even to the point of being denied. But that will NEVER take away the pain, my lived experiences and feelings, nor make me feel grateful for being saved from a "worse alternative". My focus is to stop both the drip and the alternatives, and from that starting point, one kind of suffering is not acceptable because it is better" than the others.

Only as an adult could I again put my feet on the soil I had left as an infant. Instead of a poverty stricken Korea where people were struggling to get food on the table, I met a modern country which did not lack anything in material terms. But most importantly, I saw the viable alternatives to the life I had lived. I met the children who for different reasons could not grow up in their biological families, but who were given a new chance in their local community, in their own country. There, right in front of me, were

the domestic opportunities which I had been told all my life did not exist. Instead of lives filled with misery, I met thriving, living human beings who never had to leave Korea despite their unfortunate circumstances. And my entire being envied them.

When I at age 24 met my own birthparents and lived in their house, I also lived together with the answer to the question of how my life would have been if I had not been adopted. That answer was my younger sister who had grown up with our biological parents, my sister who always had food on the table, who had all her material needs met, and who even got a higher education. I found out the real reason to why I was adopted away, and I the sense of loss I felt can not be described. Without my parents' approval, my entire life was altered, my future stolen by a kidnapper. And I realized that all my suffering had been for nothing, it never had to happen!

Not a day goes by without me grieving the losses I suffered because of the long chain of events which eventually led to me growing up far away from Korea. Every single day I live with the consequences, separated from my own biological family not only by geography, but also by language, culture and mindset. And when I look at my sister, living her life the way mine should have been, I feel a poignant sting in my heart. Not only because I could have had it, but because I am supposed to feel lucky because I don't. And because my adoptive parents' lifestyle by many is considered to be superior to that of my birth parents.

To be "saved" from a pond only to live the rest of my life with the drop, I would have preferred to not be pulled out in the first place.

In a way it is kind of like the analogy of a transplanted organ - the organ would have died with its original owner if not transplanted, but the price paid for "living on" in a new body, which by the way is being SAVED by and would have died without the organ, is a lifetime of external medication and chemical manipulation to prevent rejection. The organ will forever be foreign tissue.

When being asked if I believe in adoption, I answer that I do. Because I believe adoption has a place and if handled correctly, it can be a positive alternative for children who can not remain with their biological parents. I believe that the pain inflicted by the initial separation can be healed by loving, understanding adoptive parents and that adopted children can thrive if their new family is carefully prepared for the upcoming challenges.

I do not, however, think that adding the additional burdens of being separated from not only one's biological parents, but also from the country of birth, the culture of origin, one's own language, growing up in racial and ethnic isolation, and forever be an outsider both in the country of birth and in the country one considers to be "home", should be inflicted upon a child. Losing one's own family is just more than enough to handle. The price paid is simply too big, and no amount of "acceptance" or material wealth can ever make up for the losses involved.

Instead, I encourage domestic solutions to be found, and I have with my own eyes seen them in action in Korea and elsewhere. A lot more resources should be spent on family preservation, as most birth families would have kept their children if only they had been given a fair chance. Secondly, domestic adoption or other placements in the local community should be encouraged, e.g. through SOS Children's Villages. Unlike orphanages, SOS Villages consist of families with full time, stay at home "parents" in charge of each family house, each family house located next to a group

of similar family houses. The children grow up with both biological and non-biological siblings, meaning they are never the only one of their race, ethnic group or situation. The children go to local schools, they have local friends, and they have "normal" lives in society. And the best part, they get to remain in their own country, keep their own name, and do not have to be uprooted from their native culture. So in the event that they one day can be reunited with their biological parents, there will be no culture shock or language barriers separating them.

Those things might seem "trivial" to most people, but since I never had them, I know how much they really mean. At the same time, I also know that such opinions are not popular with those who think of themselves as "colorblind" and tolerant, nor are they considered to be politically correct in this day and age.

No one asked me if I wanted to "save" someone or something else - my adoptive parents' chance of parenthood & happiness, nor my adoptive society's need to feel noble. I literally feel like a stolen heart from a corpse, trapped in a foreign body.

Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop.

There is no bigger pain than the one considered to be a blessing.

By Sunny Jo