

## ENGLISH STUDIES

### *Being an Australian in a Korean shell*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Growing up as an Australian in a Korean shell has been an interesting experience. I will talk about some experiences that most other people wouldn't be aware of and address some of the issues that have arisen as a result of this.

#### BACKGROUND

I was born in Busan, South Korea, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September in 1987, and placed for adoption.

When I was two weeks old, the Eastern Child Welfare Society sent me to Seoul, the capital city to live in a foster home with foster parents.

When I was 40 days old, my photograph was taken, and sent to my prospective Australian parents, Mark and Joy Elford, who collected me on February the 10<sup>th</sup>, when I was around five months old. On the plane ride home, I cried for about four hours, probably because of my new parents' strange sounding language and features, such as blonde hair and paler skin.

On February the 12<sup>th</sup>, we arrived in Australia and were greeted by many members of my new family. My brother was jealous of my attention, pulled my hair and made me cry once again. So although he looked less foreign than my other family members, he wasn't a comfort to have around either.

On April the 14<sup>th</sup>, 1989, I was officially adopted, and became an Australian citizen.

#### FAMILY

My family consists of my Australian born and bred parents, and my brother and I, who were both adopted from South Korea. I am very fortunate to have such a loving family, and as I have grown up with them, I accept the fact that *we are* a family. We are comfortable with the mixture of heritage, and don't perceive ourselves to be abnormal. The detail that none of us are blood-related doesn't affect the dynamics of our family.

However, some people think that we aren't a *real* family because we look different. Many other people who see us in public aren't used to seeing two Caucasians and two Koreans together, and disassociate us as a family. Many times when we're shopping, my parents and I are treated as separate customers, because salespeople don't recognize that we're together. So although we are accustomed to the way our family looks, other people aren't.

#### QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

I have been asked about my heritage countless times. I don't mind satisfying people's curiosity, but there are appropriate times to ask. If people I have a relationship with ask me about where I'm from, I have no problem with answering their questions, but when a complete stranger makes a remark about my appearance, it can be slightly offensive. When a stranger asks where I'm born, it seems as if they are questioning whether I have a right to be here, and whether I'm a valid Australian because I look different to them. Although it may be out of genuine interest, it feels like they're just trying to slot me into a

category in their minds. When this happens, I tend to answer their questions anyway, despite the fact that they make me feel alien.

You'd be surprised at how often this happens! During a tuition course during the holidays, the tutor sat down on the corner of the desk and said, *'so how does a person who looks like you end up with a name like Jo Elford?'* Last week, I was walking past the vending machines when they were being restocked, and the man commented that I *'looked like a bit of a mixture.'* Both people proceeded to ask me about my heritage, if I wanted to return to my roots, and anything else they could think of. It's times like these when I think that people don't have the right to question my validity; I had no personal relationship with those people, and the questions were completely out of context.

## **CULTURE**

I've grown up in a middle-class, white Australian culture, so it is difficult for me when I'm challenged as being something different, and belonging elsewhere. I dislike being classed as a 'stereotypical' Asian, someone who speaks with that particular accent and knows karate. I feel conspicuous when an Asian face appears on television, and I'm ashamed of some of the images that are conveyed, because I don't want people to think that I'm like some of the ditzy characters that are shown, just because I have a similar appearance.

Many people assume that because I look Korean, I have general knowledge about Korean culture and language. I was adopted when I was five months old, so I don't remember anything about Korea, and learning about it isn't a priority in my life. So when people presume that I'm knowledgeable about Korea, they make me feel somewhat inadequate. It feels as though I'm not a complete Australian, because I look Korean, but I'm not a real Korean either, because I don't know anything about it. It makes me feel like I don't truly belong anywhere.

## **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

Fortunately, aside from the questions, I haven't experienced much racism. I think it's more difficult for guys, because they are faced with the stereotype of Asian gangs. On occasions, kids have made faces at me, or called me names, but I try not to absorb it. It's just their immaturity or ignorance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Today I've focussed on the negative aspects of being adopted, but they are far outweighed by the positives. If there are any issues that I face because of my nationality, I have loving family and friends who are happy to listen. Overall, I am very blessed, and I feel incredibly thankful for my family, and my adoption.