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Korea

If a chapter in my life was titled, "Caroline's Best Experiences," it would start and end with my trip to Korea in the summer of 2004. Korea was not only a culturally eye-opening and educational experience, but an emotional roller coaster. I do not think I can describe in words how special this trip was to me.

I was born in Kangwondo Province, South Korea in the summer of 1984 to a family of eleven. My mother died when I was a year old and my older brother and I were adopted and brought to the United States in 1985, right before my second birthday. While my family in America is a wonderful one and I have never encountered any problems as an adoptee, I have always wanted to go back to Korea and meet my family. As a child, I desired to know if I looked my other siblings, what kind of person I would be if I had never left Korea, and how my life would be different if I had not come to the states.

I had an experience in Korea no other person I traveled with had. While at my homestay, I emailed the Eastern Post Adoption Agency and sent them the information regarding my adoption. I was curious whether or not it would be possible to get a hold of some members of my family while I was still in Korea. I was not sure if I would hear back from them and pleasantly surprised to receive an email from a social worker who said she was more than willing to help me while I was in the country. From the information I provided her with, she was able to find my oldest sister and send a telegram to her explaining my presence in Korea. On Saturday, only two days before I was to leave for America, the social worker told me I could go to their agency in Seoul and my sister would come and meet me. The agency was a small building a couple stories high in the heart of Korea's capital. When I arrived, I discovered I would not only

be meeting my sister, but three sisters, two brothers, a niece, and a nephew. Excitement rattled my body and I was so nervous the palms of my hands were sweating. I cannot remember exactly how I felt when I walked into the first-floor room and met family members I had gone 18 years of my life without. It was almost as if I was meeting complete strangers who just happened to have the same blood running through their veins as me. Speechless, and without knowing what to do, I stood near the door and peered in. The agent introduced me to my oldest sister and once her arms were around me, I knew I was suddenly home. The waterworks started and there was no holding them back. It was all slightly awkward because my family and I could only communicate through my professor who acted as our translator. For the first time in my life I could look at a group of people and at pictures of my parents and know the reason why I look the way I do, why my hands are so large, why I love sports, why my hair is so thick, and my smile, crooked. The smiles on the faces of my siblings were ones I will never forget. The next day, my oldest brother picked me up with his wife and took me to meet the rest of my family as well as pay respect to my parents' graves in Kangwondo. I visited the house I was born in and saw the poverty in which my family used to live. The sacrifice they made by giving my brother and me up for adoption was a great one. They loved us too much to deny us the opportunities they, themselves, did not have.

My trip to Korea opened my eyes to my own ignorance. Whenever I was approached by Korean people and asked things, I shamefully had to look them in the eye and tell them I could not speak the language, despite all outward appearances. The longer I was there, the more I came to the realization that I did not know about my own culture or its customs. When my oldest sister asked me if I wanted anything while I was in the country, as a present from the family, I politely told her no. The idea of picking something out just to give to me seemed

preposterous. Seeing my family was the greatest gift I could receive over my trip and I did not want them to have to spend money on me, even if I was their younger sister. The next day however, my older brother asked me the same question. Again, I told him I desired nothing for myself. He looked sad when he realized how different American culture was from Korean culture. I explained to him that in America, it is impolite to accept gifts unless it is a birthday or Christmas and families do not need to give each other gifts when they see each other. He proceeded to tell me that if they sent me back to America without any gift from the family, it would be disgraceful. The understanding that it was extremely unkind of me to reject their offering of a gift, as their sister, finally sunk in. I was angry with myself for not having known more about Korean customs, and crushed when I saw my brother saddened when he discovered the large rift between our two cultures. All of the students at the University were obsessed with learning English because they found it extremely important to know, based on the growing globalization of the world. In the United States, while students have the opportunity to learn other languages and are pushed to do so, there are no requirements to become more culturally knowledgeable or language proficient. Americans tend to haughtily believe that they need not learn how to speak another language fluently, but that other people will learn English instead, to accommodate the Americans.

There is no possible way for me to write about everything that happened to me while I was in Korea. I cannot convey how dear the trip was to me\y heart or how much I learned not only about the country and its culture, but about myself. I was blessed with the opportunity to experience a part of the world completely different from my own and took advantage of every occasion to uncover the true essence of Korea