

## **A Letter from Korea**

### **By Daniel Kearns**

About nine months ago, I found out my birth mother was alive and living in Seoul, S. Korea. At first, we communicated very slowly through snail mail. By March, however, we were communicating quite quickly through e-mail and a third-party translator (she only knows a little English, I know almost no Korean). One of our topics of discussion concerned meeting in person. I asked her if she would be interested in coming to America for my wedding, as I assumed that would happen within a year or so. She responded by telling me that she could not leave Seoul because of her parents waning health. Furthermore, her parents decided they would like to meet me, so visiting Korea became a priority. I ended up booking a flight and flying to Seoul from May 24-31st.

The following is an e-mail I wrote to my family and friends from Seoul.

Dear Family and Friends,

Greetings from Seoul, South Korea, the land of the morning calm. I wanted all of you to know that I arrived in Seoul safely and everything has gone smoothly in terms of getting to my hotel and meeting up with my social workers, my birth mother and Liz Lee from Case. God has been extremely sovereign; my adoption agency, my birth mother's apartment, my hotel, and Liz Lee's apartment are all within about ten minutes of each other. You would find this especially amazing if you had ever been to Seoul. The city is home to over 20 million people... apartment buildings and enormous business towers loom on for miles and miles. Apartment complexes remind me of ant hills, with tens of thousands of people living on mere acres of land.

In many ways, I find Seoul extremely disconcerting. The population is enormously homogeneous. You can literally go hours on the street without seeing a single non-Korean. It is very unlike an American city, where different colors, races, ethnicities, etc. are so heavily prevalent. Ever since I got on the airplane, there has been a struggle between myself and other Koreans. The Korean cultural expectation is that you will be fluent in the language and traditions of Korea no matter where you grew up and no matter what circumstances you were raised in. Thus, I am mostly viewed by older Koreans as a third-rate Korean... and if they find out I'm adopted, it's even worse.

On Friday, I met with two social workers at Holt International (the agency I was adopted through 21 years ago), and then met my birth mother and her parents. I can't really put any of this in words, other than to say it was emotional, bewildering, and difficult. On the one hand, I see the physical resemblance in my birth mother and

know she held me in her womb for nine months, and I feel some loyalty and affinity to her. On the other hand, these people seem like complete strangers to me, and our differing languages and cultures isolate us.

I've been fed like a king since I arrived in Korea. Liz Lee + birth mother = enormous amounts of food at least three times a day. I love the food, but my body is having a difficult time taking in the sheer volume and acidity of the meals here. After I get home and upload some pictures to my computer, you can see just how much I've been eating. I believe there were about 30 dishes (many were small, mind you, but still!) involved in the lunch I ate yesterday.

Please continue to pray for me and also for the salvation of my birth mother. It has been tremendously difficult for me to be here, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. I haven't had time to recover from jet lag (I've been waking up at 3 or 4AM most mornings and taking a jog around the city...very fascinating) before being thrown into a lot of emotionally exhausting experiences. I'm struggling to figure out how honest and open I should be with my birth mother. You might think this is silly, and I should be completely forthright, but it's not quite that simple. It's not a question of lying to her, but of how deeply I should share my thoughts and emotions with her. She is ecstatic to see me and can't believe I'm real. She is always holding my hand or stroking my head or holding my leg when we are together. She is treasuring every moment we have together, and is always wavering between smiling, because she never thought she would see me (she did not see me when I was born) and crying, because she wishes she could have raised me, and feels as though it is now too late.

I want to bring happiness to her life and be a son she can be proud of. But in my heart and mind, it is very, very clear to me that Hershey is my home, and that my mom and dad and my brothers and sister and Sarah and my friends are my home. While I would still like to learn Korean and learn about Korean culture, it is not really 'my own'. I feel like a complete stranger here, an impostor that looks Korean but has nothing Korean about him. In America, I used to wish I was white, because I was so different from my family and friends. I'm old enough now that I've accepted my race and God's sovereign plans for my life, but I can easily recognize how much easier it would be if I were white in this culture! If you are a white American in Korea, everyone wants to practice their English on you and they want to have their picture taken with you, etc. But I am often viewed as a bastard here, with an enormous amount of social stigma attached to myself and my birth mother. When we went shopping together, she asked that I not really speak to anyone, because she did not want another Korean to know I was adopted. Instead, many thought I was a mute!

So it is very clear to me that I belong in America, not here... and this has always been the case since adolescence. I came to Korea to please my birth mother and to share the gospel with her. But I cannot really tell her to her face, "Your city and your culture are completely strange to me, and I am sick for home and family and Sarah and friends and cry every night because I am so lonely here." It would devastate her, and she has already had such a difficult life. From the first day we met, she was already speaking about how the day of my departure was coming so quickly, and how much it troubled her that my time here was so little. I feel a little guilty, because I am very much looking forward to returning home.

My birth mother did not want to go to church with Liz and I, which was disappointing to me. But as I begin to understand the culture and the depth of shame involved in having a child while unwed, I also understand it is not a simple or easy thing for her to attend a church. Liz and I went to a bookstore and I bought my birth mother a Korean Bible yesterday, and I will give it to her tomorrow. I have told her that I am continuing to pray for her and her parents; sometimes she seems very non-responsive to these words and brushes past them, other times she seems very emotional. The language barrier makes all communication very difficult, so I can never really know what she is thinking.

Everything that is happening here is so heavy! There is little laughter, and I miss the lightness of life. I am counting down the hours until I see my family, Sarah, Buttercup, Hershey, my friends, etc. Today I am going to an ancient palace with my birth mother and tomorrow I will visit the hospital where I was born with my birth grandfather, so he can thank the doctor with me present. Tomorrow will also be the last time I visit with my birth mother and birth grandparents. Liz and I may try to hang out tonight and see the city when it really comes alive (I can't wait to see this, because during the day, it is so much more crowded than any city I've ever been in. I can't imagine the night).

Oh, one last thing! The church Liz attends is incredible. It has something like 10 services a week, and I think about 30,000 different people attend the various weekly functions. On Sunday, we went to a 4PM service and they had six different sanctuaries open, so they could seat everyone. The service was in Korean, so I understood almost nothing (they did sing a few English songs), but it is extremely Bible-centered and passionate. 6 of the 10 largest churches in the world are in Seoul, with weekly attendance in the tens of thousands. On Tuesday night, I may attend Liz's Christian medical fellowship and play guitar with the guy leading worship. I don't expect to sing in Korean, though... the language is so foreign and difficult that even

after being here for a week, I have only picked up a few words and I still can't read the alphabet.

There is so much more I could write, but this e-mail is already so long! I thank God for His faithfulness, even in such difficult situations. I believe He connected me to my birth mother after 21 years of silence because He will grant her salvation. Please pray for patience, as I want so badly for things to happen soon... but it could be years or decades, and I must simply continue to pray for her faithfully. I miss all of you and can't wait to be back in America. Thanks for your prayers. God bless.

gripped by grace,

- daniel

Daniel Lee Kearns was born in S. Korea in 1984 and grew up in Hershey, PA. His loving adoptive family had two children of their own and another son two years after his adoption. After studying philosophy, engineering and music Daniel is pursuing an advanced degree in mathematics. In 2005, he discovered his birth mother was still alive. Several months later, he traveled to Seoul and met his birth mother and grandparents. Daniel plans on returning to Seoul during his summers to study the Korean language/culture and spend time with his birth family.

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NOTE: I discussed the current positive adoption language with Daniel in relation to the use of the phrase "of their own" to describe his parents biological children and not himself. I found his response to be refreshing and honest so I am happy to leave it here unedited. Daniel makes the point that since "everything is interpretation. I'd rather presume upon folks to interpret text in an educated, mature sort of way than to dumb everything down and lose the finer nuances of language." The psychoanalyst in me finds this to be refreshing in that some of the changes in terminology protect adopted children but others clearly reflect a state of defensiveness or at minimum, some discomfort that we need to continue to struggle with. I hope this point opens some dialogue and I welcome your thoughts.

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