

## Adopted, from Seoul to New Jersey

*Karl Ludwig*

*Karl Ludwig, adopted from South Korea at five and a half years old, arrived in the United States in 1975. "I barely spoke English. My mom said my only English saying was 'I'll have a coke.'"*

I very vaguely remember the days in Seoul. They seem like what I would describe as black and white, from an old movie. Like old photos. My images of those days were like of a green grass field, a big watering can or bucket, some dogs running around, straw huts, a bridge, stuff like that.

I think my father was an American soldier, a GI, so I don't remember him at all. I believe the only glimpses I have are of what I would call my grandfather and grandmother, who raised me. I don't have a visual recollection whatsoever of my birth mother.

A lot of people don't really know whether I'm of Hawaiian descent, or Asian descent; but I go into a Korean restaurant and people will look at me and right away say I'm Korean—I'm only half Korean—and they've honed in specifically on that. I don't speak Korean, I just know how to say hello.

**Memories Upon Arrival:** I remember a big house with a big family. There were 4 children—two of us adopted; two, the son and daughter of the Ludwigs. It was a large house in a nice neighborhood. From day one I knew—I remember someone telling me—that you're given an opportunity to succeed or do well, more so than I would have in my natural country in my natural environment.

I think my grandparents said that if I had stayed in Korea I would've been picked on because I was kind of considered a half-breed—like being American, an Asian American. I was pointed out as a minority too, because I'm part Asian. So it's kind of weird but I think I got to be a little bit more accepted and it was a little bit easier in America.

I believe my plane arrived at JFK airport, and I was picked up by Jay and Joan Ludwig. Throughout the whole process when you are selected for adoption, they take a picture of you, and the family from the American side can say, "Well, we elect to adopt him," and then they're brought up to speed on my progress through a foster parent or a guardian. What Joan always told me was that after the birth parents decided to place me up for adoption they put me in a foster home for I guess a year, and then I was adopted.

I grew up in Morris County in Kinnelon, New Jersey. I spent pretty much my entire life there until I was seventeen or eighteen, when I graduated high school and then moved out to go to college. It was funny because when you're growing up you don't realize what you have. We always complained as adolescents that it's boring, it's quiet, there's nothing to do here. Now that I am a parent I kind of miss that—I want that for my own family.

Kinnelon was fantastic. I really enjoyed it because there was a suburbia where there's a lot of stuff to do and there's a movie theater right there and a lot of places to go. It's a great school environment, with sports and everything else. I can honestly say I felt like I had a great opportunity for every success.

**Kindergarten:** I was five and a half and barely spoke English in Mrs. Brown's class. It was like taking someone and throwing him into a completely alien environment. Not understanding the language, not speaking it—with English as a second language, it's kind of a sink or swim theory. You are surrounded by people who do not speak your language so it's kind of difficult to communicate. I think that's why you try to stress or focus on symbols or other ways of communication, with hands, sounds, smells, pictures.

My mother told me it took six months of being completely immersed in the language—by then you tend to understand a lot. Television helped a lot, sitting in front of the television after class, *Sesame Street*, just the little cartoons on Saturdays.

You can sort out some things but you're completely like a newborn baby. You are dependent on the people around you to teach you everything in terms of food, water, shelter, clothing, the fundamentals; everything from right to wrong. Not only am I completely immersed in the family but with school it's a different environment and there I'm also completely dependent on everybody.

All the time it was kind of awkward dealing with it. But once it's a handicap and you see it as a handicap and you grow up with it, then you can turn it into a strength. So it's kind of neat when you look upon it that way and say, "Well, this is me, I can't really change who I am." So you are going to gravitate toward people that aren't going to cut you. Growing up in high school I had great friends. I had great neighbors too. Because I remember the first day they were always very nice.

The crowds I hung with in school were mostly white. The high school I went to at that time was maybe 5 percent minority, including Asians and African Americans, so it was like 95 percent white, so even growing up all my neighbors were white.

As far as wanting to learn to speak Korean, there's always been that desire. Growing up in high school I always was curious and fascinated with language. So I took Latin, I took French, and Spanish. To this day I speak more words in Spanish than I do in Korean or Chinese. But I worked in a Chinese restaurant so I picked up a few phrases there, and I guess it has always kind of been my dream to learn Korean again and to go back.

**So Many Questions:** In terms of ethnicity, I consider myself Asian American. I like to teach my kids a little bit about my family history. My only regret is that I wish I knew more about it—my background and genealogy. And even medical issues too. There are so many questions, so many areas.

It's a little depressing in America—where you can go to a horse show or a canine show and can even trace the animals' breeding down to so many hundreds of years. I've always wanted to do that about my family because it's just a way for me to honor my past and learn from it, as well as I can say to my children or their children—my grandchildren—"Watch out for cholesterol because there's heart disease that's been in the family," or breast cancer or something like that. Even traits or appearances—like I'm half Korean, half American, and my wife is a redheaded white American, yet we have two offspring who are almost blonde haired, blue-eyed. So the question then is, was my father like that? Was my grandfather like that? Who does he or she resemble? So it's pretty much where did he get the blue eyes from? If it was just my wife and I, some of those questions never would have arisen. But now that we have kids, it's like, okay, now there are more questions. Like where does he get that stubbornness from? Where does he get those blue eyes from?

Then there are questions about profession, education. What were my mother's and father's professions? What did they do? Like if they were a nurse or military. They could then give me feedback on why I chose the career path I did, or my personality. Why I am the way I am. If there was mental illness in the family, it would be good to know that too. Even physical characteristics, mental characteristics, emotional characteristics, psychological characteristics, everything. I've thought about going back to Korea and maybe trying to trace genealogy and roots, but it's just a huge undertaking. It'd be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

I did try to access the adoption records with consent from Jay and Joan. I contacted the adoption agency and they were able to help me out a little bit. The adoption agency got in touch with correspondents from Korea, who sent me a letter saying my birth mother had passed away. But it's on letterhead, which makes you think, Well is that real or is it just someone's conception or what someone wants me to know? So there's always been a blank or a void there.

I'm very thankful, I'm very blessed to have the opportunity to be adopted because I know there are a lot of people who aren't, and they're less fortunate than I am. So I like to take time, especially around November (the month I first arrived in this country), just to reflect on what my life could have been had I not been adopted.

But it's kind of hard to reflect back on that because I'll never know what I could have been. I definitely have more appreciation for what I have because of the opportunity that Jay and Joan gave me. I look at it in the physical aspect, but then I take the emotional aspect of it as well as the psychological aspect of it and I always think, What would it have been like if I had been able to make contact with the birth relatives, if I had ever contacted my father? It would be kind of neat to fill in those voids, too. Those empty spaces.

I'm 95 percent sure I never will be able to, but there's always that 5 percent hope. So it's almost like being in a divorced family, where the father's gone to the right and the mother's gone to the left. I've always thought of Jay and Joan as my natural parents and that's the firm foundation on which I grew up. But the left side of me says, Is my real father out there? Did he pass away? What is he like, is he poor? Is he homeless? And if so, can I help him out? And my mother too, who has passed away; she was Asian and I've been trying to track that down too. But am I ever going to get the opportunity? I doubt it, but the interest and curiosity is always going to be there.

**Choosing a Career:** In college I wanted to pursue a medical career because I always loved little kids and I wanted to be a pediatrician. During sophomore year I was taking a lot of science and medical courses, but I didn't know if I could afford medical school. I looked at the military and then law enforcement. I graduated in criminal justice, thinking I could go for law enforcement to save up for law school. So right out of college I got into law enforcement and I've been there ever since. I'm a police officer in Sussex County, New Jersey.



Karl Ludwig and family

I have to believe that's part genetics. Since my father was in the army and that's how he met my mother—or that's what I've been told—maybe that's one of the reasons I chose the path I did. So sometimes when I make a decision like that, maybe it was more profound than I thought or realized.

Maybe if I had to do it all over again I would choose to be a fireman. Or there's always that college role too, where I wish I had gone into the military. The uniformed services—just seems like there's what I call a constant echo.

Do I find it difficult being an Asian American police officer in a basically white suburban town? Yes and no. They respect the uniform and I think we're going to have problems no matter what ethnicity. But I find it advantageous when we do come across

minorities and they see I'm a minority; so I look upon that as a helpful instance and not a hurtful one.

People look at my résumé and it says Karl Ludwig—and they're thinking, That's possibly a German name, especially with the German spelling of Karl with a K. Then I show up; some people look at me funny and say, You're a Ludwig? So it's always interesting. I'm used to it now just because of the comments and the looks. I mean, it's not awkward, it's kind of like a good icebreaker; or people look at me and think, Well, you must not be full Asian. Well, I'm not full Asian, but being adopted, I don't know if I'm German or not.

Do I find myself gravitating to my Korean heritage? At times, yes. I find it to be almost cyclical. Sometimes I gravitate toward the food, the dialect, and everything else, and there are times when I have the same routine of going home, watching the kids. Everything else, like researching my background, I have to kind of step away from because of my family life and the daily grind.

**That 5 Percent:** I'm definitely a happy person. I like to make other people happy and laugh and joke, I'm 95 percent fulfilled. Growing up I felt more unfulfilled, but now that I have a family of my own, I feel like okay, this is my path, these are my kids and I want to raise them as best as I can and give them every opportunity I was given. But there's that 5 percent that's unfulfilled: where's my genealogy, where are my roots with my medical history, what did my father look like? There will always be questions that will be unanswered that we never may be able to deal with.

**Kristen (adopted sister from Korea):** I think it helped a great deal to have Kristen. I looked upon her like a big sister and was able to lean on her. We compared and contrasted, like, Growing up, did you notice this, did you notice that? We talked about family: Have you tried to get in touch with your family and have they tried to get in touch with you? Your friends, do they notice this about you, do they notice that about you? She was a great support that way.

Did we ever ask each other why we were given up for adoption? Yeah, we've talked about it and I've talked about it with my friends. In college I had a friend who's Korean and he's adopted too. I guess we narrowed it down to affordability, economics, opportunity.

In terms of economics, my parents couldn't afford me, so I was given the opportunity to receive or get a better life in the United States, given how society would look down upon me because I was part American. So my sister, Kristen, and I always talked about that and admitted that it was probably better.

Am I able to understand it more, as I get older? Yes. And do I look upon it as a small child who doesn't understand the concepts a grown-up would? Is there still anger there? Yes. A little bit. I'm like, How can you give up your own blood? Why couldn't you make it work? Why couldn't you get a second job? Or if I was five and a half, I don't know what child labor laws were then, but maybe I could've tried to help raise money for the house, shine shoes or something. But maybe they didn't want that type of lifestyle for me either. It's a full gamut of emotions and issues and topics.

I think growing up there was more anger, but now with a family of my own I can understand why, but it's hard because I have a daughter who is six years old and, having raised her for her first six years of her life, I look at her and say, Can I give her up? Would I be able to put her up for adoption? Given the financial situation I am in, I of course say, No way, hell no, I'm not going to give her up, nothing can take her away from me. But growing up in a grass hut, with barely anything to eat and possibly tattered clothes, possibly, yes. I think it's understandable.

Am I scathed from this? Yes. But I'm living my life in a positive light because I was given an opportunity, and now that I have a family of my own I want to give my kids even opportunities that I never had growing up. So I look upon the future with hope but I also want to remember and honor the past.

When my kids get a little bit older I want to say, This is why you should appreciate the finer things, because your father grew up in

hardship. Right now I haven't told them much because they haven't been asking. But there was a gift that I had brought to my mom and dad from Korea that I believe my grandfather had made and it was a straw house that had a little light bulb in it and you plug it in and it's like in a fish tank or aquarium. When I moved out and bought my first house, Joan gave that to me as a housewarming present. She said it was symbolic because it was the first present I had given her and it was a house. So now here's my first house and she said, I want you to take this back and hold onto it. I thought it was kind of neat because it's always been reminiscent of where I came from. It's very fragile. I can't put a price tag on that. It's worth more to me than a Rolex watch and it was handmade. So I look at it as a gift that I'm going to show to my kids when they inquire about where I came from and what happened. It's a great tool for learning and for saying, This is why I want you to appreciate everything you have today. We haven't gone down that road yet but I think in the near future we will.

**Growing Up:** I loved having a big family; Christmas was fantastic, dinners were great. Even sports. We were quite different. The oldest was twelve years older than I am, so growing up on that type of scale was a little bit different. But it was great. Growing up I loved having a big family and now I have a big family; I have four kids. At home with dinner and breakfast, my mom and dad were fantastic. Some of the things they did I wish I could do for my kids but I can't because of my schedule and my hours.

In first grade we would have show and tell, so I would have my mother bring something in if I forgot it, like my pet cat, and all my friends would be like, Why does your mom look different than you? Why is your mom white and you're Asian? So it was interesting.

It was definitely as ideal a family as possible. But then there were outside circumstances that would happen—that I'm adopted and I can't deny that and I can't escape that. So it was kind of a neat embrace.

This all definitely defines me in terms of who I am and it forces

me sometimes—once a day, sometimes once a month—to take a look at some of my reactions as to why I do some of the things I do, or why I look the way I do. Or why I answer some of the questions of my kids the way that I do.

I told you I have four kids—one is a newborn and he's only five months old, so everyday we're looking at him and wondering what his hair's going to be like, or his eyes. The firstborn, she looks Asian. You look at her and she looks a lot like me; you can tell she's Asian. The next-to-oldest and the third youngest, you look at them and he's got blond hair and blue eyes and she's got light-brown hair and hazel eyes so, the oldest asked me, "Well, why are they different? Why do I look like you and they don't look like me?" So it's just interesting the questions that they come up with, and we have to talk about adoption and about how you look like I do, and they look like the mom, and we don't know what my dad looked like, or my mom looked like. So just in terms of family or societal dynamics, there are pretty interesting forces that make us take a look at and accept each one of us for who we are. It's kind of neat that way.

**Racism in Dating?** I felt it strongly three times in my life. I was dating a girl in high school and we were over at her house for dinner; you could just tell when there's tension in the air and over dinner conversation, in close proximity, there was an unkindness—kind of like an elephant in the room where you feel unwelcome or unwanted. And after dinner the father politely excused himself and I was asked to leave the house. I said okay, and I asked why, and he said "It's my house, I don't have to give you a reason. I want you out." So it caused a lot of tension, a lot of heartache, and it was kind of sad. But I honored his wishes as I was in someone else's house and I left. I talked to the girl two times and she was like, "I'm not allowed to date you anymore." So I said, "Okay, if that's how you feel and that's what you want to do, fine."

She was Italian. And American. Actually both of them. I had two girlfriends with similar type instances, one in high school, one in college.

The third situation, she was Irish and said her father didn't want her dating me anymore. So I said, "Okay, if that's how you feel, if that's what you want. But you're over eighteen, you're able to make your own decisions." But she said, "Well, I don't want to go against my family," so I said, "Okay, I understand that too." She was twenty-four and I was twenty-four, something like that.

I dated two Asian girls that I can think of; one in high school and one in college. Actually it was the complete opposite with the parents. They really liked me a lot and she said, "My parents love you—they love you more than me." Things were going good but it just didn't work out.

**Religion:** I'm Episcopalian and I'm raising my kids to be that way. I've always wondered, Are we always a product of nature or nurture, are we part of our environment? If I took a Buddhist monk's baby and raised him Catholic, would he convert back? Would he have the opportunity or would he be happy in their religion? I'm happy with the Episcopalian faith and celebrating Christmas and I believe in Christ and everything else. Baptized, raised, and confirmed.

I've always thought, Okay, I was raised as a Christian. I can't say that religion was a part of my life in Korea, but it always made me wonder how come I'm not a Buddhist or any other type of religion. So it was interesting in terms of the parallelism or just thinking about it. It has led me to a deeper belief or appreciation of religion. It's another avenue I think about, maybe go down that path later on in life, or research it when I have more time or when I'm retired.

Do I remember my name before it was Karl? Yes. It was Jung Suk Lee.

I have a wonderful family and wife and house to be thankful for and a career and education. So I'm definitely blessed in all those aspects.