

The Gift of Family

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The earliest memory I could dig out of my mind was my typical life as an orphan. The orphanage I came from was moderately new. The densely compacted buildings were at least ten stories high, with the exterior walls having pink stucco. Each window had metal bars around them, which looked like a prison cell. My daily routine in the orphanage was to wake up, eat breakfast, complete schoolwork, playtime, lunch, work, playtime, dinner, and sleep. I was convinced that this was my life. The nanny staff that took care of me was dressed in pink trench-like lab coats. In the orphanage, there were hundreds of kids like me with no family. Honestly, I should not say the word “family” because I did not know what a family was.

One day at the orphanage, I was given a Diego backpack full of goods.

“JinZheng JinZheng,” In Mandarin, the director of my orphanage told me, “See what your American mama brings you.”

The backpack was packed with toys and clothes of all sorts. As I inspected each item closely, I realized that the labeling was not in my native language. Later, the director pulled me aside to take photos of me doing various activities with the goods I received from my backpack.

“I will send these photos to your mama and baba, who will adopt you. You now have a family,” the director firmly explained.

At first, I felt an overwhelming peace. Then dark clouds spread through my entire body while not being able to move. My heart was overly pounding like a basketball that never stops. I could not converse any words for days.

It was a special day. It was the day the Americans came to take me into their family. Excitement and fear phased through me. I was rather shy. When they physically stepped foot into

my orphanage, I was hiding behind the director. When I peeked through my small eyes, I saw five individuals. An older man was formally dressed, a father with no hair, a mother who had long gold hair, and two little boys whose yellow shirts matched each other. They were all as tall as a giraffe, and their eyes were opened like a pumpkin. I could not understand what each of them said because they spoke English. Some of them attempted to utter my Mandarin name.

“Hi JinSung, this is your mama,” the woman with the blond hair called out.

Immediately, my insecurity level boosted up the skyscraper. After an hour, I knew they would not leave unless I went with them, so I finally walked slowly to them with my head down. Eventually, after a long afternoon, the Americans took me as their child. We left the orphanage, never to see it again.

I spent two weeks in China. My time in China with my new family brought me to explore the outside world. For the first time, I captured a taste of freedom by enjoying a variety of incredible foods (mainly American cuisine), traveling to extraordinary places, and most of all had the opportunity of a lifetime to have fun. I did not know this surprising lifestyle existed. Frequently, I went swimming in hotel pools and recklessly fought my two older brothers with blue flashing swords. I would say I won every time in the sword fights. My new family was happy, and I was happy, which was a terrific sign. On our last day in China, it was time to go back home. I did not know where we were going or where home was. In my mind, I thought we were home. I never bothered to ask because I could not speak English. Most of my communication was through my emotions and body gestures.

During the day, our airplane ride from the crowded Chinese airport was the longest exhausting experience I have ever had while waiting to land in America. Without hesitation, I asked my mom when we would land.

“It will be a long time before we land,” my mom replied.

While not liking the answer, I shut myself down by not talking to anyone.

“Get some rest, Jonah. Maybe when you wake up, we will be in America.”

It took over twenty-four hours to land on American soil in Los Angeles, California. This was the moment I officially became an American citizen. We obtained our luggage at the airport and soon started driving to Idaho in the white Toyota minivan. During the car ride, I could discern my mom and dad’s faces that they were anxious to hustle home.

It was in the evening, right before the sun went down, when we arrived home. From that vivid moment, while looking at the small house with a red door and the vast amount of green grass, I found myself in my zone. In my consciousness, all my surroundings were in slow motion. I heard cheerful noises that distantly entered. That was the second I found out I have more family. Everyone came outside with bare feet to greet me. Most of them were neighbors and friends. After a long day, I took time to settle down and explore my new life.

For a long time, I was at the center of attention. I was accepted into the life of my new family. Over the past twelve years, my most cherished memories have been anchored on my family. None of my family members thought of me as adopted. They made me feel like I was always part of their lives.

Whether being biological or adopted, I cannot think of a better family than the one I have today. Desmond Tutu once said, “You don’t choose your family. They are God’s gift to you, as

you are to them.” I love this saying because a family does not have to be blood-related. I came into this world with a purpose. That purpose for me was to be adopted into a family that loves me.