



Such a Beautiful Family

Lori Mei McManus

Age 7. Elementary School

“Meet me by the bike rack at recess,” I say to Ana Acosta, “I’ll tell you all about me.”

“It’s a thrilling tale,” I begin. “Mere hours after birth, I was left at a gate in China.” My hand indicates the iron school gate as an example as I speak. “From there, I was adopted by my mom and dad.”

I proudly embark on retelling the story my dad had retold to me so many times over the years-- how he and my mom went to the White Swan Hotel, eagerly awaiting a knock at the door announcing the arrival of their baby. I spare no detail of the excitement and anticipation my parents felt.

Three hours later, Anna Acosta, having ruminated on my story asks, “Do you like being adopted?”

As I open my mouth to respond, carrying on our conversation from recess, Miss Bianca, swoops down upon us. “Do not ask about that ever again,” she tells Ana sternly. With the same frowning face, she beckons me into the back office and closes the door.

“Are you okay?” she asks me in earnest.

“Yes,” I tell her, utterly bewildered and a bit embarrassed to have been singled out. Why wouldn’t I be okay?

Age 7. Victory Park

“Push me higher!” I call to my dad, flying parallel with the treetops as the swing arcs upward. At the peak of its swing, I jump off, landing catlike on the wood chips, and run off into the distance.

A complete stranger, a woman, approaches me, “Do you know that man who was pushing you?” she inquires.

“Yes,” I tell her.

“Are your parents here?” she persists, her eyes scanning the park.

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My ears prick up on high alert. Something isn't right here. If I answer "yes" will she hurt my parents? If I answer "no" will she hurt me? After a moment of hesitation, I respond, "Yes, my parents are here."

She walks away to stand under a tree, still observing with concerned eagle eyes as I continue to play. She looks worried as my dad catches me at the foot of the slide. She scans the playground looking for a man or woman who might be my parent.

Age 15. Kidspace Children's Museum

"We have a lost child," a voice echoes over the walkie talkies, "He says his name is Jacob and that he's here with his mom. He's 4 years old, African American, wearing a green t-shirt."

My fellow staff members and I leap into action, scattering to find Jacob's mom. My eyes scan the museum floor, looking for a woman with signs of distress on her face. My eyes linger a little longer on each Black woman. I wonder vaguely if it would take longer to find a parent who does not look like their child.

Age 16. High School

The bell has yet to ring. Mr. Alb is pacing the classroom, setting up his space and greeting us as we file in.

He approaches my desk. "Lora! I met your parents at Back to School Night. They look so different. They are White, and you are so oriental. I don't get it. How can that be?"

I stare at this 40+ year old teacher with a Master's Degree and wonder what to say. "I don't know," I mumble and laugh awkwardly.

Mr. Alb walks away. I look down at my hands in my lap wondering why when the simple two words, "I'm adopted," got lost on their way to my mouth when I used to tell my story with such pride and gusto. Miss Bianca's words echo in my head, "Don't ever ask about that again."

Age 17. Southwest Airlines

"Remember to put your own mask on before assisting your child," the flight attendant says to me, making eye contact and indicating the young boy in the middle seat adjacent to me. I nod. I suppose it seems so improbable that the White man in the aisle seat is actually our father. She chose to speak to me, her brain somehow rationalizing the mere 7-year age difference between me and my "child" which seemed far more logical to her than the possibility that the three of us could be one family.

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Age 22. Faculty Meeting

“And here we have our school climate survey data broken down by families of color versus white families.”

I raise my hand. “How are families of color determined?” I ask.

“It’s by parents’ race,” Dr. Kodak explains. I make a mental note that, by these metrics, transracially adopted students would be categorized as a White family.

Age 24. Victory Park

“You should play with me. I’m nice,” a confident Black girl says, no more than 4 years of age.

We begin to play. I glance around looking for her grown up. My eyes land on a Black family eating burgers at a nearby picnic table. Swinging from the monkey bars, she reaches for the next bar, but her 4-year old wingspan falls just short. She tumbles to the woodchips below and begins to wail. Not wanting to approach closer than 6 feet, I look over to the burger-eating family wondering if they notice her crying. Out of nowhere, a White woman with greying hair comes and scoops up the crying child.

“Is she yours?” I ask with what I hope is a polite smile. She nods. I leave her to calm and soothe her child.

In the background, I hear her teacher-like voice, “Are you crying because was that mostly surprising or mostly hurt?”

I want to say something like those contrived phrases that my parents and I used to get, *you have such a beautiful family*. But I was still too lost in my own assumptions.

Age 24. Home

I lie awake as my fiancé slumbers next to me. She and I are frequently mistaken for sisters, or friends, or mother & daughter. I know that we may someday be called *such a beautiful family*. I think back to that moment in the park four days ago when the emotional-less backhanded compliment of *you have such a beautiful family* almost slipped off my tongue. I think what I really mean was *it is nice to see another family like mine*.

About the Author

A China-born native Californian, Lora Mei McManus is a graduate of Cal State Channel Islands. She currently serves as the PK-12 Chair of Equity & Instruction at The Blake School in Minneapolis where she leans heavily on her experiences as a transracial adoptee to inform her work around intersectionality.