WORLDS APART

Inter-country adoptions are bringing joy to more Australians than ever before. But for the adopted children, the experience can be bittersweet. Many feel acutely the loss of their birth families, culture and sense of belonging. By Lucinda Schmidt.

It was a stranger who finally understood. Lynelle Beveridge, adopted from war-torn Saigon by an Australian family in 1973, was cycling around Vietnam's Mekong Delta region in 2000, on her first trip back to her birthplace. After hearing Beveridge's story of being brought to Australia as a six-month-old, the stranger – a local woman – conveyed in broken English something that Beveridge had felt all her life but had never heard from anyone else: "You've missed out on so much, then?"

"This lady summed up what is so frustrating to an adopted person from a Third World country," says Beveridge, now 32 and working as an IT consultant in Sydney. "People would always say that I was so lucky. Not one of them ever acknowledged what it was that I'd lost – my identity, my culture, my birth parents and family, my history, my life, my beginnings. I didn't feel lucky; I felt unlucky. I felt robbed of everything that other people take for granted."

In the 32 years since Beveridge was adopted by a Victorian couple who already had two biological children, inter-country adoptions have boomed, partly because local children are rarely put up for adoption any more. In 2004-05, Australian families adopted a record 434 overseas-born children, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, up from 370 the previous year. Almost one-third were from China, 22 per cent from South Korea, 14 per cent from Ethiopia and 11 per cent from the Philippines. Only 65 local children were placed with adoptive families.

But amid all the cute images of white parents cuddling their Asian and African babies, there are deep-rooted social, cultural and ethical questions. For some of the children brought to Australia in the 1970s, growing up as the only Asian or black face in their community was a traumatic, isolating experience. As well as the issues common to many adoptees – a sense of rejection, feeling alone and finding it hard to trust others – trans-racial adoptees sometimes have further layers of loss and identity problems. Because they look so different from their parents, their adoption is public, prompting unwelcome questions from strangers; many encounter racism; they feel Western but don't look Western; some have spent their first few months in orphanages where they were rarely touched; most have no chance of ever finding their birth families; and those raised when assimilation was the aim have little connection to their birth culture.

"I felt very ashamed of being Asian," says Beveridge, who grew up on a dairy farm in rural Victoria, where she was surrounded by Anglo-Saxon faces, including her parents' four biological children. As a child, she refused to wear red, associating the colour with Asia, and she hated having her photograph taken. She longed to look more like her sister, who was tall with curly hair and freckles.

"It's in your family photos that it's really reflected back at you that you're different. I attributed being Asian to being ugly and I always felt on the outside of everything. I felt like I didn't fit in, although at the time I didn't attribute it to being adopted. I grew up thinking adoption was great and my parents did the best they could." It was only when Beveridge moved to Sydney, aged 19, that she began to link her feelings of low self-esteem and depression to her adoption.

Racism can add to the confusion. Indigo Willing, who was adopted as a 14-month-old from Vietnam in 1972 and grew up in Sydney's northern beaches, remembers sitting on a bus when she was 13 and hearing two teenagers behind her loudly discuss how there were too many Asians in the neighbourhood. She hopped off and walked the rest of the way home, past graffiti proclaiming, "Stop the Asian invasion" and "Asians eat dogs".

"Growing up was a real challenge for me," says Willing, 34, the founder of a support group for adult adoptees, Adopted Vietnamese International. "I felt confused and embarrassed. There was a lot of emphasis on my Asianness by my peers but I knew nothing about Asian people." Instead, she tried hard to be like her parents' two biological sons, in what she calls a "monocultural" household.

"For some inter-country adoptees, the experience is difficult," says Angharad Candlin, manager of the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC). "For all adoptees, whether trans-racial or not, the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in?" are significant. But for inter-country adoptees, growing up in a family where they may not look like anybody else can be hard. Going out with their family is a very public experience because it's obvious they are adopted."

As well as the appearance issues, some inter-country adoptees find it hard to grapple with the knowledge that their birth parents abandoned them. Sofie Blichfeldt, for example, knows she was left on a Seoul street for 24 hours with the umbilical cord still attached before she was taken to a police station and then an orphanage.

She was almost two when a Danish couple adopted her and took her to Copenhagen, where she lived until she was nine. Then the family moved to Adelaide. "I was a Danish-Australian trapped in a Korean body," says Blichfeldt, 33, who works as a music and television producer in Melbourne. "I made a conscious decision not to have any Asian friends and I lied about my background, telling people I was an Eskimo brought up in Denmark."

When she went back to Korea in 2003, with a friend who is →

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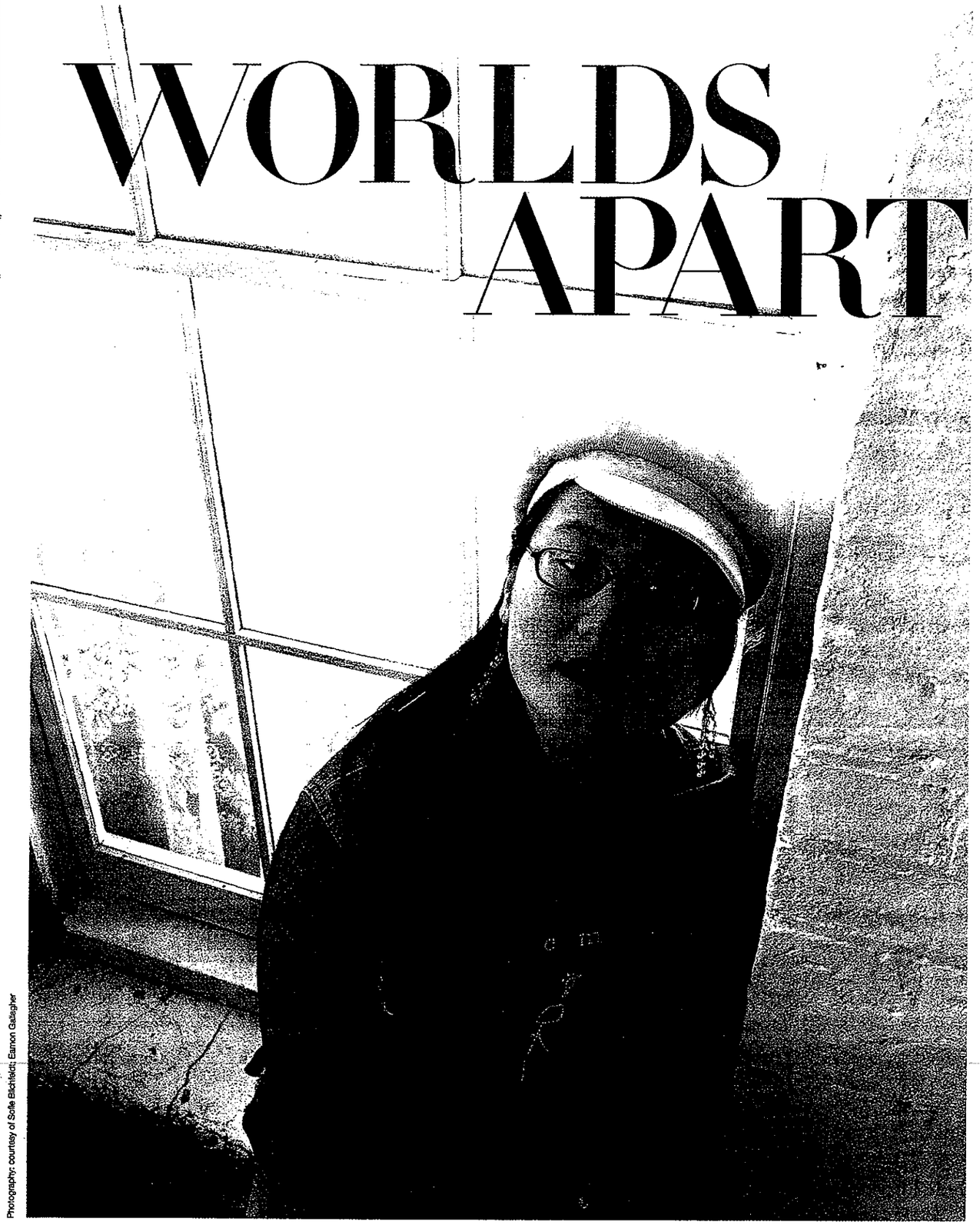
Korean-born Sofie Blichfeldt (left, with her adoptive father at age two); today (opposite), at 33.



Photography: courtesy of Sofie Blichfeldt; Eamon Gallagher

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

Sydney couple Joe Filshie and Georgie Dolling (above) felt a close connection to Africa even before they adopted their daughter, Poppy, now 10, from Ethiopia. They had travelled extensively in the region, including spending two months in Ethiopia, and they were married in Zimbabwe. They went back to Ethiopia to collect Poppy in 1996, when she was five months old, and have returned twice since.

On their first trip back, when Poppy was two, they discovered that she had a biological aunt, whom they have since put through university in Ethiopia. Filshie, 42, has taught Poppy some basic Amharic (an Ethiopian language), while Dolling, 40, has done cooking classes. African art decorates their home.

The family belongs to Australian African Children's Aid Support Association, which organises picnics several times a year and an annual weeklong camp. They also make sure Poppy celebrates Ethiopia's New Year and Christmas at functions organised by Sydney's Ethiopian community. The couple, who have two biological sons, Jasper, 7, and Ziggy, 5, hope to adopt another Ethiopian girl to give Poppy a sister from the same cultural background. "The Ethiopian heritage is a big part of our family life," says Dolling.

Canberra couple Lesley Mulder and Peter Lambert (right) adopted Iain, 5, from South Korea when he was a few months old and two years later collected Callum, 3. Each week, they take their sons to a Korean church, where Mulder, 46, Lambert, 48, and another pair of adoptive parents are the only white faces. The family joined the church after taking Iain, then two, to a Korean festival. "We were the only white people and we were so obvious," says Mulder. "I thought, 'Is this what he'll feel like all his life?'"

The family also belongs to the Kimchi Club, a support group for parents who have adopted from Korea. Then there's the weekly playgroup with adoptive and biological mothers of Korean children, the language classes, charts on the walls at home with Korean characters, and life storybooks for each child, which include information such as their birth certificates and photos of their foster families.

Last September, the four of them spent a fortnight in South Korea, visiting the foster families, and they plan to make the trip every two or three years. Even so, Mulder worries. "Sometimes you wonder if you're doing enough," she says, "especially when you hear stories of adult adoptees – the huge disconnect some of them feel. I want my sons to be comfortable with who they are but also to realise that who they are is multifaceted."

One regret is that she didn't make the most of her first trip to Korea to pick up Iain. "I didn't take in as much as I should have. When you're at the beginning, you just want to get your child. You're hearing all this stuff about race, culture and heritage and you think, 'Yeah, yeah, just get me there.'"

Photography: Stephen Bacon; Peter Brew-Bevan; courtesy of Paul Anderson; courtesy of Indigo Willing

also a Korean adoptee, she felt uncomfortable about the two-week summer camp. "I'm ashamed to say that I was thinking, 'Why am I among all these Asian people?' I think I was racist against myself."

But the trip was a catalyst – she returned and cried for weeks. Years of bottled-up emotions flooded out and hypnotherapy revealed she was suffering post-traumatic stress from being abandoned. "I thought I was over it, 30 years later, but I wasn't. I was spending a lot of time feeling sorry for myself." After a second trip, in 2004, when she visited the orphanage she came from, she began to feel more comfortable about her origins and now has Australian, Korean and Danish flags hanging in her study. "That's who I am."

Another challenge for some inter-country adoptees is finding their birth parents. Many have false or vague details on their birth certificates, from birth mothers ashamed of their unwed status or from orphanages that took in babies found on the streets. PARC's Candlin says because more inter-country adoptees are seeking their birth families, the centre has launched a guide to help them navigate the bureaucratic maze.

Paul Anderson, now 32 (above, with his dad in 1980), was born in Korea; (right) Indigo Willing as a baby.

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For one Sydney woman, who was adopted with her twin sister from Sri Lanka when they were six weeks old, finding her birth parents, a brother and sister and an extended circle of more than 30 aunts, uncles and cousins has been a joyous experience. Gabbie, who prefers not to disclose her surname, has returned to Sri Lanka three times in the past six years, after finally tracking down her birth mother on her third attempt. Next year, she plans to spend six months in Sri Lanka doing a placement for her degree in international social development.

Meanwhile, she speaks to her birth family every few weeks by phone and messages them at least weekly. She sends money when she can, aware that even her small salary as a part-time youth worker is more than her biological parents – both cooks, who live in a one-bedroom shack – earn.

"I think I've had a positive adoption experience," says the 24-year-old, whose parents later adopted →

another Sri Lankan child as well as two Australian-born children. "I am blessed with fantastic adoptive parents, who were open and honest about where I'd come from and the civil war." Unusually for the time, her parents travelled to Sri Lanka to pick up the twins, meeting the birth mother and promising to look after her babies. They also kept in contact with three other Australian families who'd adopted Sri Lankan children at the same time.

Not all adoptees have such a happy story. Paul Anderson received a letter out of the blue five years ago from his Korean birth mother, who wanted to see him and his sister. They were adopted in 1979, when Paul was four and his sister two, and grew up in rural Tamworth, then Coffs Harbour on the NSW North Coast, seeing few Asian faces.

Anderson, now 32 and working in Sydney as a telecommunications specialist, says he'd had no real urge to find his birth parents but he and his sister travelled to Seoul a few months later. Anderson says that watching the videotape of their reunion reminds him of how awkward the whole event was. "It was strange," he says. "We were only expecting her and there were seven other relatives. We can't speak Korean, she can't speak English and we had translators. It was like an alien encounter."

Neither he nor his sister has kept in contact. "It's difficult with the language," he says, "and what do I talk about? There's no real connection." However, the encounter did trigger a lot of soul-searching as to why Anderson felt different, found relationships hard in high school and lacked direction in his 20s.

"This whole thing about identity – it's not about dealing with the fact that I'm Asian; it's about dealing with the fact that I'm Western," says Anderson, whose main link to Korea is his girlfriend. "It's a cliche but I'm stuck between two worlds; I really feel that. I'm not Asian and I'm not Western."

Lynelle Beveridge, who founded the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network, says it is common for inter-country adoptees to be positive about their experiences while they still live with their adoptive parents, although some rebel as teenagers or strive to be the successful, grateful child. But in their 20s and 30s – often when they leave home or have children – some start to ask questions. "The majority will feel grief and anger at some stage," Beveridge says, "for the loss of so many things people take for granted – who do I look like, what is my name, where was I born, who are my family?"

"I didn't like my colour or my hair or my features when I was growing up, although I do now."

Maria Carter, 47, was born in Jamaica; (above) at three.

Nowadays, the focus is on adopting the culture as well as the child – and adoptive parents receive training before they are even allocated a child. The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) and Victoria's Department of Human Services (DHS), which administer inter-country adoptions in those states, both require parents to attend compulsory education sessions about the impact of inter-country adoption on the child's identity and they are strongly encouraged to join a parents' support network for their child's country. Parents must travel to the country to pick up their child and they are urged to take their child back to their birth country as often as they can afford.

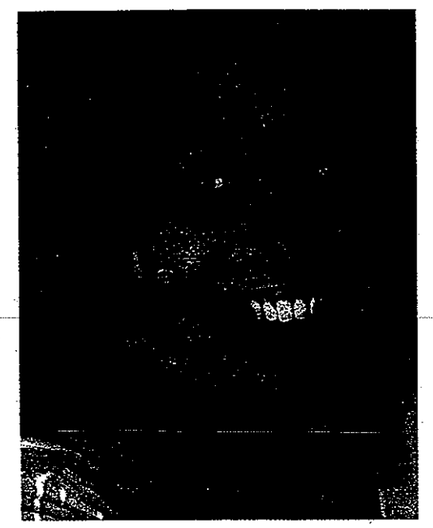
"It's a challenge for anyone to teach their child a culture that they are not from," says Mary Griffin, director of DoCS's adoption and permanent care services. "It can't be a token thing. It's not just about going to a Korean restaurant on their birthday."

Sam Cavarra, DHS manager of family records and inter-country services, says most adoptive parents are committed to ensuring their children have an understanding of their birth country and culture. It's an issue that Indigo Willing has been exploring for her PhD in sociology at the University of Queensland, interviewing families who have adopted children from other countries in the past decade. "I think there's been a huge cultural shift since I was adopted. In the past, parents were trying to make their children fit in. Now, there's much more of a celebration of the child's culture."

For those brought up before there was much thought given to the long-term effects of trans-racial adoption, the struggle can be debilitating. At 47, Maria Carter is still dealing with identity issues, after being adopted out by her Jamaican mother to an English couple, who then moved to New Zealand. She was called "nigger" at school and was afraid of her domineering adoptive mother, who also had five biological children and adopted three others.

"I felt I was more of a possession and that I didn't fit in," says Carter, who now works as a grants officer. "I didn't belong in my family – I still feel that now. I guess I was ashamed of who I was. I didn't like my colour or my hair texture or my features when I was growing up, although I do now."

At 20, she escaped to Sydney with a girlfriend and she is now considering a move to London, where there is a bigger West Indian population. Adopting a Jamaican child is also a possibility. "For a long time, I resisted the urge to adopt," she says. Now, I accept what happened. Adoption doesn't have to be a negative thing; it can be positive." ●



"I am blessed with fantastic adoptive parents who were open about where I'd come from."

Gabbie, 24, keeps in contact with her birth family in Sri Lanka; (above) with her adoptive dad at six months.

Photography: Stephen Baccon; Edwina Pickles; courtesy of Maria Carter; courtesy of Gabbie