[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Okay, so, Sunday morning, I'm minding my own business, walking down the street, pass by a group of fellas. One of them's like, “Good job.” He starts doing a little clap. Ah, okay. But another one says, “One step at a time. That's the only way to beat it.” “Huh?” “Never give up. Today's the first day the rest of your life.” “What?” Now, I don't know what it is about my appearance, the sweats, the huffing and puffing. Okay, okay, okay, okay. Maybe I put on a few pandemic pounds, hey, but for some reason, they see me as someone new to exercise.

[upbeat music]

Like I'm beginning a brand-new life, turn over a new leaf or something. And instead of laughing and calling me names, they want to cheer me on my new path. “Fruits and vegetables. That's the only way. Drink in some water.” Because whatever it is they're seeing, it can't be possibly further away from my own truth because not only do I look good to me, I'm not exercising. In fact, I'm heading toward the donut shop.

See, no one knows our truth. No one understands our inner lives. So, today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present The Birth Dream. I'm going to pull back the curtain just a little bit. My name is Glynn Washington, and I refuse to be defined by random people in the park, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, the world sees you one way, you see yourself another. We begin our search for the truest self in 2010, when Andy Marra has just been offered the chance of a lifetime. She's going to Korea. Andy, take it away.

[lively music]

**Andy:** I was working at a progressive Korean community organization here in New York. One of our programs offered trips back to Korea and I jumped on the opportunity to go. Before leaving, I wanted to learn a little Korean, toss up the alphabet, toss up the numbers, [Korean letters] and political terms, tong-il, Reunification, hae bang, Liberation. But secretly, I wanted to learn Korean to be able to not just introduce myself or have the basics in place, but so that I could be able to say hello to my mother or father, if I had the rare chance of finding them.

[somber music]

I grew up reading through my adoption files. All throughout my childhood, I had access to these documents. I often remember waking up in the middle of the night and [pause] thinking that halfway around the world, somewhere in Korea, my family was going about their day. To be clear, I didn't really have a plan to find my family. But I often wondered if there were some sort of unseen connection or bond that’s still tied us together.

[ambient noises]

I was very eager to get off the plane. I was very jetlagged. My legs were killing me. I remember going through customs, collecting my suitcase, and being immediately struck by the sounds in the airport. Everyone was going about their business, heading to their gates, heading to baggage claim. And all of it was in Korean. I also realized that mostly everyone looked like me. It was a jarring experience. Even for someone like myself, who lives in New York City, and there is a prominent and visible Korean American community, I was just struck that I blended in, and I wasn't the other.

[somber music]

After my trip, my formal work trip had ended. I had scheduled an appointment in advance to visit the agency. I knew that I needed my parents' birthdates in order for me to search for them. From what I learned from my friends, it could potentially be an uphill battle to even look at your file. I asked a Korean person who lived in Seoul to serve as my interpreter during the visit, and wanted to know everything that was written in my file.

Walking into their offices, I saw these women come in and out of the building with babies, and my heart stopped. I remember just my emotions being a big ball, a big tight ball in my chest. I was led into this small white room with no windows and bright fluorescent lights, and a metal table with chairs on each side for folks to sit in, and a box of tissues on the side of the table.

When my file was shared with me, there was some information that was blanked over by post-it notes, because it contains sensitive information about my parents, so their social security numbers, for instance. I learned that I had an older sister that I never knew of. I grew up for some reason believing that I was the only child or I may have been the oldest child, which led to me being put up for adoption and I never fathomed having another sibling alive. My head was just spinning.

Through my interpreter, I asked for my parents’ birthdates. And the social worker asked me why. And I said, saju, fortune telling or divination. And in order for you to receive your fortune, you need birth dates. You need your own birthdates, but you also need your parents birth dates as well as too. The woman for a minute studied me, and she said, “Okay, makes sense. Let me just run this by my superiors.”

The woman left the office, and that's when I pulled out my phone and started taking pictures of my file. I didn't understand what I was taking pictures of. But I knew that this was information that might help me in my search for my family. And so, I left that adoption agency with my parents’ birthdates, and photos of information about my parents. I was scared. It makes you question what's real.

I was the closest I've ever been to being able to find my family, and to be in such a position, after years of wondering, questions and doubts, and fears. It wasn't calculated, but after the trip to the adoption agency, I asked my friends if they would take a subway trip to part of Seoul where my family had lived at some point so that I could visit a police station in that area and initiate a search. And they said yes.

We made a pitstop to our hotel, and I proceeded to change. Put away my skirt, put away my earrings, or my necklaces, not wear makeup, and pull back my hair into a ponytail. And in that moment, I remember feeling an immediate sense of shame for hiding a big part of who I am. But as someone with an intersectional life, I wanted the opportunity. I desperately wanted the opportunity to be able to say hello to my family before potentially being turned away because of my gender identity.

One of the first thoughts I had in coming out as trans was how it might impact my ability to search for my family. I was aware of the climate in Korea. Many folks think of trans people as being-- as our identities being a disability. Or, in some instances, being a sin. I delayed my medical transition. That meant a delay in being able to take hormones, as well as transition-related surgery. I'm not sure if it was the right or wrong decision or choice, but it was one that I thought that was important for my family.

I left our hotel looking very different than I normally presented. We headed to the police station. We arrived, and I remember sitting in this booth with a police officer on the other side of me. And with my friends interpreting, I asked to initiate a search. They said, “Here's a piece of paper, a form to complete. The search is going to take a month.” Time was not on my side. I remember blurting out, “Is there any chance the search could be expedited? I leave for the States tomorrow.” The police officer said, “No, this is the process. Here's the form. Give us your phone number and we'll call you. Have a nice day.” [scoffs]

Before the police officer got up to leave from her side of the booth, I said, “No. I'm a Korean adoptee, I've waited 25 years to look for my family. I know this is an inconvenience, but I need your help. I need your help now.” Something just changed. All of the officers including the woman who was helping me looked at me very differently, and they ran a search in their national database.

In that booth, I learned that my father had passed away in 1994. I was in fourth or third grade when my father had died, and I had lived all those years thinking that he was alive, that I would have the chance to meet him. And he was gone. And so, I had to grieve for my father that I had never met or never knew and never would know at this police station in a matter of minutes. The police officer came back to the booth and said, “There are two women with the name that you gave me, and with the same birthdate.” Two women in the entire country.

[somber music]

One of them lives in the southernmost tip of the country. The other woman lives less than an hour away, and I just immediately knew, in my heart, that was my mother.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Don't go anywhere, Snappers. When we return, Andy finds out whether her intuition is right. Stay tuned.

[somber music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Birth Dream episode. When last we left, Andy, she just convinced the Korean police to run a national search for the mother she never knew. And that search has just revealed two potential matches. Snap Judgment.

**Andy:** And less than an hour later, the police officer approached us in the waiting area and said, “We found your mother, and she will be on her way to the police station in an hour.” Relief, fear, anxiety, excitement. I was relieved that I was able to find my family. I was fearful of somehow messing up my first meeting with my mother.

The police officers led us up to their cafeteria where we had dinner. And shortly thereafter, we went to grab a few bags of snacks and drinks, just in case my mom wanted to sit down and talk. We didn't know what to expect. My friend who had a Korean cell phone with her, got the call from my mother that they had arrived. We were led down to the front entrance of the police station that overlooked the parking lot. Just pacing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Nervous, trying to remember the broken Korean that I have learned, trying to look presentable even though I felt very naked and not me in the moment.

A car drove into the parking lot, and I saw two people from a distance get out of the car and approach the police station. I saw an older woman wearing a very nice-looking black dress and heels, and a younger woman. The two of them approached the front entrance of the police station. I remember my mom walking up the stairs to the landing and she looked so nervous. My friends weren't saying a word, they were frozen in silence. All I remember doing was robotically bowing as my introduction and saying to my mother, “Annyeonghaseyo,” Hello. “Nae ileum-eun Andy,” “My name is Andy Marra. [Korean language] I'm so sorry, I can't speak Korean. [Korean language]

And I didn't look up, I was stuck midway in the bow, these just hot tears flood my face and drop down on to the ground. My mom grabbed my hand, and I looked up. And she just let out this profound wail, like this visceral, guttural wail. She hugged me, she embraced me and wouldn't let me go. And I later learned what she said. “My baby has come home."

We proceeded to go back to my hotel room. My friends stalled for time with my mom and my older sister in the hotel lobby, just so that I could go up to my room, clean it, and make sure that there was no evidence of me being a woman for them to see. When we brought them up to my room, we were sitting in this living room like area, eating oranges and talking. My friends were interpreting. And I remember thrusting the document from the adoption agency and saying, “Look, I know about our family.” Both of them looked at the document. My mother's face just darkened, and she said, “None of this is true. I did not relinquish you. This was a decision by your father, and I was not consulted. I didn't sign any paperwork to send you away. You were always wanted.” I felt like my heart had just cracked open, and that I could finally breathe. I was never forgotten after all those years.

And so, I called the travel agency that I booked my trip with, and I was able to extend my trip for two more weeks. My mom said, “You need to come and stay with us.” She lived in a modest two-bedroom home, and it was a basement apartment. She presented me with breakfast. A table full of pantone, bulgogi, japchae. And she also brought out this bowl of miyeok-guk, seaweed soup. Miyeok-guk is often served to women who have just given birth because it contains a lot of nutrients and minerals, but it's also a dish that served every birthday as a reminder of the significance behind it between a mother and a child.

She very timidly offered this to me. “I know that we've never been able to celebrate your birthday. But I wanted to make it for you just given how important this moment is.” I remember the smell of a little bit of soybean paste, a little bit of the seaweed, so the salty tang of the ocean, and thinking, “Wow, I'm going to eat my first meal that my mom has ever cooked for me,” and found myself crying and also stuffing my face full of food.

In the two weeks that I was with my mom, she would, on cue, make me breakfast. This big breakfast every morning sitting at the table for me. When we would travel, she would hold my hand. There were a couple of instances where I tried to pay for meals when we would eat out. My mom would tackle me with the strength of a football player and make sure that she always paid.

I still had my hair pulled back. I still was wearing jeans and short sleeve t-shirts. My luggage was still back at my hotel that had all of my clothes, and accessories, and makeup. And it was almost as if my transness, my true self was left back at the hotel in Seoul. There were a couple of instances where I thought I would come out, but I always batted it away.

My mom in Korea is also very active in her church. And so, I was still fearful of the prospect of coming out. I didn't want to ruin this magical moment.

My mother came over to my sister's apartment where I was spending the day, and she joined me, my older sister as well as a friend who was volunteering to interpret that day. She sat me down and she said, “I have a question for you. And I'm not sure how to ask it, but I want to ask you.” And I said, “Sure. That’s I'm here. Let's get to know each other.” “Is there something that you're not telling me?” I said, “We've only reunited for two weeks. And I'm sure there's plenty of details about my life in your life that will come out as time progresses.” She said, “No, no, no, no. It seems that you are concealing something about yourself from me. What is it?” And I looked over at my friends, and I said, “There's no way that my mom is talking about the thing that we both know to be true about me. But she doesn't know. Or, does she?”

My mom was watching us have this conversation in English, and she finally said, “Look, maybe I can give you a clue. Please don't get offended. But I think it has something to do with how you look, you are very pretty.” I started to sweat. Somehow, my mom had figured something out, and I had no idea what gave me away. “There are a lot of things about me that you don't know. Would you still love me anyway?” She said, “What do you mean?” And I said, “Well, let's say for instance, like you found out that I murdered someone, would you still love me?” Perhaps that wasn't the best example to give, but I was completely caught off guard. And I had to find something that would let me gauge my mother is potential reaction. “I'm just saying as an example, would you still love me regardless?” And my mother said to me, “Of course.” I looked at my friend and I said, “I have no choice.” And she asked me, “Okay, how do you want me to translate this?” And I said, “No.” I looked to my mother, and I said, “[Korean language] Mom, I'm not a boy. I'm a girl. I'm trans.”

And almost immediately after the words came out of my mouth, my body went limp, and I couldn't look at my mother. My face got so hot and read. I just started to cry profusely. I was just so scared thinking that, “Well, at least I had a couple of weeks with my mother and my family, but it's time to pack up and leave.” Very gently, she reached over and she held my hand. She looked at me and said, “Mommy knew.”

There was no disgust or disdain or anger. She was very calm. And as I was wiping away the tears on my face, I just sputtered out, “How did you know?” And she responded, “Birth dream.” So, many Korean women reportedly have these dreams as they're pregnant, dreams that reveal the gender of their children. My mother followed up by saying, “I had birth dreams for your older sister, your younger brother, and your youngest sister. But I never had a birth dream for you. Your gender was always a mystery to me. And now I know why.” As my friend was just in translating this, I was just sitting there. dumbstruck. My mom said to me, “I thought I had a son, but I have a daughter instead, and that's okay. You're precious. And I love you.”

I felt liberated. Anything was possible. I didn't have anything to hide from my mother, or the rest of my family. I could just simply be me.

When we would go out to eat at restaurants, she would often talk to the servers who she knew. There was one instance when my friend that was also still with me, nudged me and said, “Your mom was talking about you to the server.” And I said, “Oh, yeah, about what?” And she said, “She's introducing you as her daughter.”

[sentimental music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, thank you, thank you, Andy Marra, for sharing your story with us. Andy still lives in New York, where she's the Executive Director of the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. Andy and her family in Korea, they are tighter than ever. To find out more about her work, check out our website, *snapjudgment.org.* The original score for that story was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Regina Bediako.

[upbeat music]

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And this, this is not the news. Now way is this the news. In fact, if you have a glorious dream of pancakes and swimming through rivers of butter and syrup, but you better didn't have that dream, but you're visiting overture in-law's house and have your father-in-law find you backstroking off his new dining room set, but if you do, you would still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*