

Hank Fortener: I was raised by a white family in the Midwest, same as you, but I was raised in a state certified foster home. We fostered over 36 kid over a seven year period, my parents have adopted eight kids from six different countries. I didn't see it as different, I didn't see it as unique, but I would have these moments where I'd see people see us and that's when I realized, "Oh, my family is really, really different."

Jason Lee: We're Jason and...

Yvonne Lee: Yvonne Lee, wife.

Jason Lee: Husband, father.

Yvonne Lee: Mother.

Jason Lee: Actors.

Yvonne Lee: Producers and seekers.

Jason Lee: Educators, explorers of identity.

Yvonne Lee: You're listening to Lagralane Spirits, a delicious podcast where we invite you into our living room for a family spirit symposium. A real talk meeting of the minds over reverent cocktails.

Jason Lee: Join us as we dive back in time to examine the legacy of our ancestors that have shaped the stories of our shared cultural history. You can find all of our cocktail recipes and show notes on lagralanespirits.com and as always, please enjoy.

Yvonne Lee: Responsibly.

Jason Lee: Welcome to episode three of Lagralane Spirits. This episode is a three part series where we deep dive into three very different adoption stories to explore the topic of identity and origin.

Yvonne Lee: What are little girls made of? What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice. That's what little girls are made of.

Jason Lee: What are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails, that's what little boys are made of. At least, that's what we were told.

Jason and Yvonn...: This is origins.

Yvonne Lee: Hello and welcome to tonight's episode of Lagralane Spirits podcast.

Jason Lee: What's up friends?

Yvonne Lee: This season, Jason and I are exploring all things identity. We will revisit moments in American history through the lens of our own family's roots and the legacy of the generations that have come before us. Tonight, we are changing things up,

right Jason? But before we dive into that, let's dive into our drink. What are you making babe?

Jason Lee: Tonight I'm making the Old-Fashioned rye whiskey cocktail. It's origin's in Louisville at the Pendennis Club, are largely undisputed, and for that, I am grateful. It's a truthful drink. It doesn't disappoint. It holds to the past and keeps us rooted in the present. Its identity is solid.

Yvonne Lee: Well, that's not really entirely true, babe. The location might be solid, but if I remember correctly as for the bartender who actually created the whiskey Old-Fashion, there are three possible candidates, yes?

Jason Lee: Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey now. Hey. Hey. Hey, you're popping my punch line. I was getting around to that. Yes. It's okay. That's okay. There are three potential inventors of this beverage. Three fathers, if you will.

Yvonne Lee: I see what you did there. No, no, no. Actually you mentioned say four fathers, if you will. Didn't you?

Jason Lee: The four fathers.

Yvonne Lee: Four fathers.

Jason Lee: The four fathers of the Old-Fashioned-

Yvonne Lee: Not F-O-R-E, but as in four. F-O-U-R, there's four.

Jason Lee: We can keep it at F-O-R-E, and we can keep it to three fathers-

Yvonne Lee: No, no, no. Because it's four.

Jason Lee: And it will be a story for another episode.

Yvonne Lee: Isn't it four?

Jason Lee: It is four.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: F-O-U-R. Well, what we're talking about, friends, is that you guys know I was adopted. I have an adopted father. My adopted parents got divorced. So I have a stepfather. I have a birth father, of course. I've done a lot of research into my origin story, my roots. And I recently found out that... I met my birth mom 20 years ago. And she told me who at the time, who she thought the birth father was. And when I met him, he believed the same story. Well, it turns out that that was a lie. She incorrectly identified who my biological father was.

Jason Lee: My birth dad is not my birth dad. The guy who I met seven years ago, my birth is another man. And you want to know how I found out all of this? Through ancestry.com, little plug for ancestry.com. This podcast was born from the

notion of all that I found about my ancestors, Yvonne's ancestors, people I thought were my ancestors. By the click of a button, I learned my legacy is not my legacy, but something else. I have a different origin story than what I thought.

Yvonne Lee: Oh my goodness. That was crazy. Finding out that you had a different dad than the dad that you thought you had. So there is your adopted father, then the birth father that you thought you had, and also the stepfather that you had, and then the actual birth father that you had.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: We have a lot to unpack tonight.

Jason Lee: Yes, we do.

Yvonne Lee: Yes, we do. And honestly, folks, if you're listening and you need to rewind that, please just go ahead and rewind because honestly, we're still trying to figure it out too. It's all complicated and if you know your own history's family, somebody's got to tell you to you at least three times to figure it out. But our first guess of our three part series will be Hank and Sueann Fortener of AdoptTogether, through the lens of what it means to adopt, we'll discuss identity and origins from the Ruda to the Tuda. Right Jason?

Jason Lee: If you say so.

Yvonne Lee: Yes I say so, of course I say so.

Jason Lee: Our podcast, right my love, is about conversation and cocktails. If we ever needed one, this is the time. So let me tell you what's in this here, Old-Fashioned. The ingredients of this, Old-Fashioned tonight's Old-Fashioned, I basically did two ounces of George Dickel Rye Whisky, I did three teaspoons of simple syrup, I did several dashes of bitters because I can. People often say, "Only do two or three dashes of bitters." I actually love bitters, so I did several dashes of bitters and for this cocktail, I did a couple splashes of water to open up the rye a little bit, because rye is a bit more, I find it to be a bit more on the aggressive side of whiskeys rather than a bourbon or a Cognac also. So I like to open up the rye a little bit more.

Jason Lee: If any of you listening are at home and want to join us, please pause right here and jump over to lagralanespirits.com, where you can grab the recipe. So babe, you have your Old-Fashioned, my love, why don't we sit back and get a little more comfortable.

Yvonne Lee: To identity and origins.

Jason Lee: To creating legacy.

Yvonne Lee: Cheers, babe.

Jason Lee: Cheers. So what's the verdict?

Yvonne Lee: This is good. This is really, really great. When I first took a sip of this, I was reminded of Chicago.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: I don't know. I felt like I took a sip of Chicago.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Living there and I thought, "Oh," all of a sudden I felt all homey and hugged.

Jason Lee: I remember when we first met in Chicago back in the back in the day and we'd go to bars after doing plays and you would order whiskey drinks. And I was like, "Oh, that she's really cool. I'm going to have to really hopefully up my game so that she could like me."

Yvonne Lee: Macallan and ginger rye, that's what it was. Macallan and ginger rye.

Jason Lee: No. I think it was Maker's, Maker's and ginger.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, yes. Oh my goodness I got it wrong. Yes Maker's and ginger... Maker's, Mac and ginger, that's what it was.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Okay. I'm much more fancy now. All right.

Jason Lee: What I also love about the Old-Fashioned, before the 1860s, I'm sorry, I was a history major, I love stories and I love history. But before the 1860s, every cocktail, really in America was basically this. It was basically the spirit, often Cognac. It was the spirit, sugar, bitters and water. After the 1860s into the 1870s, other liqueurs were introduced like absinthe. But it led a generation of drinkers to walk into bars and say, "You know what, give me what my old man used to drink." "Give me what my grandfather used to drink. Make me something Old-Fashioned." And that name then stuck to what we now drink as the Old-Fashioned. And so there's something very original and origin centric about the Old-Fashioned that grounds us in the now and in the here, for me. And as we explore these themes of identity, false reveals, lies and truth, I can think of nothing better to sip on than a well poured Old-Fashioned cocktail.

Yvonne Lee: Yes. Cheers to that. Are you ready to spill the old-fashioned tea on what happened?

Jason Lee: Maybe, no, yes.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. But did you like my joke?

Jason Lee: Oh, I did. I did. But honestly, I'm nervous. I'm nervous about this reveal.

Yvonne Lee: I know. I know you are.

Jason Lee: We are storytellers. We are sharing. And this is probably as actors, we hide behind characters often to express our truths and make belief circumstances. This is the first time that the third act reveal of my life has written itself and I'm processing what that is. And so, yeah, I'm ready to spill the old-fashioned tea.

Yvonne Lee: This is very brave of you. And this season, we are exploring all of the different facets that make up a person's identity. For those of you who are listening, we've already talked about cultural identity, racial identity and immigrant identity. But what really started this whole exploration in the first place was actually a breakthrough, and Jason, your search for your biological identity. And by now our listeners know that you were adopted as a baby by a loving white family in Mankato, Minnesota. And you started your search for your biological parents around age 16, right?

Jason Lee: Yeah, 15, 16. I was searching for my African American roots. I was raised by a loving family. The audience knows that I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska and raised in Mankato, Minnesota and Galesburg, Illinois and Decatur, Illinois in the '70s. And I was raised by a loving white family, a loving family of Caucasian individuals who I love deeply. But I always, as my afro grew out in the '70s, I was like, "Wait a second, there's something a little different here." And so I went searching as I got older for my black side.

Jason Lee: It just so happens that my uncle, rest in peace, David Andreas was adopted as well. And so I had wonderful conversations with him about being adopted and what that meant and what that means for our family. But he, in his truth, he was a white gentleman as well. So the racial component of things really factored in for the beginning of my search in the mid '80s as a teenage light skinned black man in Chicago. Yeah. So I went searching for my blackness and I found my German-Jewish, Germans from Russia, the Volga River history.

Jason Lee: My birth mother was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, and she descended from Germans who settled along the Volga river in Russia. They came over to the States between the 1880s and in the 1920s. And how I found that out was I went to Lincoln, Nebraska, I was living out here in Los Angeles at the time. Yvonne, you and I were dating. And I was driving back, you were in Chicago and I was driving back to Chicago to see you, but also to do a play at the Goodman.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, I remember.

Jason Lee: And of course, that great drive from LA to Chicago takes you right through, the upper route takes you right through Lincoln, Nebraska, actually. So I was like, "I have some time, let me stop in Lincoln, Nebraska." I drove into Lincoln, Nebraska, and I went in for some lunch, actually. I didn't have the thought of it. I was like, "Let me just drive around Lincoln." And I found the Department of Health & Human Services in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska, and four 18 bucks, you could sign a piece of paper and they would reveal your adoption papers. Everything in the state of Nebraska for adopted individuals, all adoptions in

Nebraska were closed before 1977. So I had no access to original biological information at all.

Jason Lee: My adopted parents had some parts of the story in place, but they didn't have names and they didn't have the full story. And that's something that I was really curious about. So I did that, filled out the paperwork, went did the play in Chicago, came back to LA and six months later, my birth mom called me. That's how I found her.

Yvonne Lee: And the part of that story too, is that when you actually met your birth mom, she told you the story that her mom said, "He's looking for you." Right?

Jason Lee: Yes. The story goes, biological grandmother. So my birth mom was a child. She was 17 years old when I was born. And so her mom signed all the papers and it turned out that the phone number that she had, the grandmother that she had in 1971 was the same phone number that she had in 2002. So they instantly went to her because she was the adult at the time and gave her the information, the state of Nebraska gave her the information and she called her daughter and said, "Yes, I think he's looking for you. And you should give him a call. Here's his information, if you want to do so."

Yvonne Lee: And then there was the lie.

Jason Lee: And then, the lie.

Yvonne Lee: And all during pandemic, you were doing massive deep dives into your family tree that sent you to Louisiana, Oklahoma, [Lynchings 00:15:39], Russian czas, 17 hundreds, 18 hundreds. Every day you were telling me new information about this and that, and books were flying into our house every day, gifts from Amazon all the time.

Jason Lee: Yeah, sadly, we were part of Amazon's ability to find a space [crosstalk 00:15:59] last year.

Yvonne Lee: And I mean, that you the history major was buzzing with such incredible intensity. And it's even where the inspiration for this first season of the podcast came from. And then one day-

Jason Lee: Yeah. The information that my birth mother gave me, she told me the name of the boy, the man who she was dating at the time. And that information led me to all of that history that you were talking about. It led me to her history of the Germans in Russia, the Volga Germans, they call them. Led me to, through ancestry.com, it led me to his roots, who I thought was my birth father, because I had his name and I could plug his name into ancestry.com. It led me to his family tree that opened up and revealed Louisiana and Oklahoma and Nebraska. Why his family tree, which a lot of African Americans have this story in their family tree of leaving the south at a certain point. And either moving north or west, or west, and then north.

Jason Lee: It was phenomenal history. And like you said, I was a history major and I majored in African American history and I minored in theater. So I'm a storyteller by education. And so it was just all, all fascinating. And I was so sure of this history, because I met him, we talked on the phone, I wrote him a letter, I found his address. We shared letters, we shared pictures, we talked and he believed the lie too. He was told to lie first. He was told to lie before he went to go serve our country in Vietnam. And so he believed the story for 50 years, I believed it for 20.

Jason Lee: I had no reason to doubt him because he was like, "Yeah, you're our son." He's like, "We're not together. I don't have any relationship with her now, but yeah, I knew you were coming." And one thing that was very touching that he shared with me, he said, because I had to release him of the lie. I had to tell him once DNA showed that he was not the birth father, I felt as, man to man at that point, I'm almost 50 myself right now, he had to know.

Jason Lee: And so he said, a very heartbreaking moment. He said, "When I first met you, Jason," he said, "It floored me that I could have a son like you." And that was just such a loaded, heartfelt moment that we shared. But as we've talked about, a lot of people have talked about the past year about following the science, the science don't lie, believe in the science. So I took the DNA test and it indicated, and other... my aunt popped up, some first cousins popped up. One of them lives out here in California. My birth father was not who she said it was.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, no, I remember when you told me that. And I just was like, "I can't." Every time I thought we got to the end, it actually wasn't the end, it became infinity. So Jason, how did finding that missing piece affect your identity or what you thought was your identity? I don't think I've ever asked you that question before, so it's kind of interesting to hear what you're going to say.

Jason Lee: That's a great question. And I think one of the... one of the fascinating things that I found about this is that, my running joke is I spit in files for fun right now. I've done almost every ancestry test you could possibly do. And one of them, the late great Chadwick Bozeman talked about this, he did African Ancestry when he was a studying for and preparing for Black Panther. And so I did that same test. And what was shocking is that the results showed, from the paternal line, no discernible African Ancestry which was like, "Wait a second. I'm out here looking for my black roots, what are you talking about? I'm a light-skinned black man, what do you mean no Africa from the paternal line?"

Jason Lee: And the science says basically, if there's a close proximity to Europe, the European DNA removes the possibility of finding, if it's close enough and by close, I mean like grandfather or great-grandfather, because obviously I have a whole bunch of DNA from Northern Europe, from my maternal line, but paternal there's a strong line of Scottish as well in there, which makes sense from the new birth father, the real birth father's story, who was from South Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and South Georgia.

Yvonne Lee: And that erases the, or not erase, but I mean that minimizes the-

Jason Lee: Doesn't erase it, but for the science, they say, yes. For African Ancestry's DNA test, the reveal said, if you have this proximity to Europe, we cannot isolate where in Africa or West Africa, South Africa, wherever North Africa, where you come from. Now, 23andMe, they all have the ability to track region, and so as in most African Americans, there is a strong West African presence in my DNA according to these tests and they've isolated it all as West African, Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Congo.

Jason Lee: But African Ancestry was saying at the time, this was four years ago, the science might have changed, but they were saying back then that they could not isolate it, African Ancestry. So what was fascinating about that with the lie and the big reveal in my research on ancestry from both gentlemen's perspectives, the story fit. So I want to say that again, the story of both of these individuals, one whose people were Baltimore by way of Louisiana, by way of Oklahoma. The other gentleman who was North Carolina, the Carolinas and South Georgia, both stories fit.

Jason Lee: So how it affected my identity, is I found my African roots and I've always identified, first, as an adopted child, because that was my first sense of identity. But then as I started to form my own concept about what it means to be a black man in America, I strongly identify as such, and so to find that lens, even through a lie made me feel whole.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Well, I think what's so interesting, Jason, what you have found is that because you're adopted and so you were urged on to find out who you are. There are so many black people who don't even have the information that you have to even be able to make those kinds of... to be able to even understand like... okay, I'll use my soap as an example, I've never done it-

Jason Lee: Please do.

Yvonne Lee: Keep telling me to do it. I know that there's a box in your little area that I've given to you in our house that says 23andMe-

Jason Lee: 23andMe is for you.

Yvonne Lee: And I should probably be taking it.

Jason Lee: Whenever you're ready.

Yvonne Lee: Yes. It's just so crazy.

Jason Lee: Yes, it is.

Yvonne Lee: I know we have one picture of your, who we know now is your birth dad. Do you imagine him like, it's kind of hard to tell from these older pictures, but that he's a light skinned man? Light-skinned black man?

Jason Lee: No.

Yvonne Lee: No.

Jason Lee: It's hard to tell. First, it's hard to tell, but second my understanding from other family members who have started to populate my websites, that's the thing about DNA tests, once the DNA relatives start coming in and I've got to go racial for a second. I've got the whiter than white in upstate Washington from the German side, and I've got the blacker than black from South Georgia and Northern Florida, and everywhere in between. Johny Pitts has a book called Afropean, and really my DNA represents everything that that term, Afropean, African and European, of course, everything that that term represents is embedded in my DNA.

Jason Lee: And so that's given me a newfound sense of identity as well. I'm not going tiger woods with it, it's, it's not [inaudible 00:24:55] Asian, I'm calling it Afropean because that's what Johnny Pitts did in his studies of black Europe and I dig that because, I embrace my German roots, I embrace my, my Russian roots, I embrace my West African and African roots. That for me is what makes America great.

Yvonne Lee: Jason, I'm just curious, I know some of this, but I think it would be interesting for the people who are listening if you're willing to share this much. Can you tell us a little bit more about your relationship with Mike and what that was like, I guess where it is now for you?

Jason Lee: Yeah, absolutely. The gentleman who I thought was my birth father, we became friends. He is in Kansas and he's a Chiefs fan and I'm a Bears fan and he clowns me often for being a bears fan, and I can't clown him because the Chiefs... I mean, sports, dude stuff, we connected. And if they got Patrick Mahomes and we finally got rid of Mitchell Trubisk, you got to take the [inaudible 00:26:02], right? You got to take the curves with the straights, as August Wilson said, we connected, we became friends. We haven't had the chance to meet in person, but we became friends, emails, phone calls, letter sharing, and that's still cool.

Jason Lee: Yvonne, I told our daughter, Grace, this story. That I was going to have to reveal this truth to him, and she gave me a hug and said, "That's weird, dad. What are you going to say?" And I was like, "I don't daughter. What do you think I should say?" She's like, "Well, what does it mean if he's not your birth father?" She said, "Maybe he's your godfather."

Yvonne Lee: That was so beautiful.

Jason Lee: And I was like, "That is beautiful." That is from the mouth of babes and I told him that, and he was like-

Yvonne Lee: I was like, "Jason, we did something right."

Jason Lee: Yeah, we've done something right so far. Absolutely.

Yvonne Lee: This little girl.

Jason Lee: And he responded so generously and so openly, and so lovingly to the idea of, even though as hurt as he was to have felt this lie for as long as he did, to believe something for as long as he did, that was not truth, he embraced the role of godfather too, for whatever that means.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, he really did.

Jason Lee: And that was beautiful.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Without skipping a beat, the way that you told it to me, which I just thought that was so beautiful.

Jason Lee: One thing that's always been fascinating for me on this entire journey is that I started out to fill in the story and along the way I've met people, we have a film about this, right? We talk about-

Yvonne Lee: Lifeline.

Jason Lee: Lifeline. We talk about what family means and what the true understanding of what a lifeline is and to share, and the love of those around us and how blessed we are to do that. And that comes from this feeling of hurt and loss with as much love that I was raised with in my adopted family, there was still that void of not knowing self and trying to fill in what that story is, who were these people that had that night of passion 50 years ago that created me. And where did they come from?

Yvonne Lee: Right. And with you saying that Jason, it's like, as parents and storytellers, we know that we have some work ahead of us. The way that I see it, we're the miners of truth of our own story, you and I are parents, we have our own kids now. We have a responsibility to these little ones who are everything we are, and everything that came before us and everything that will come after us. They are truth, they are our origin story, and we are their identity. They are ours because they are ours. We are complete. I mean, you are complete. And I know I'm related to you. I belong to you, you belong to me. And that's our truth. That's what I'm coming to realize is our identity, even as the questions keep coming.

Jason Lee: You're right. Absolutely. You're absolutely right. And the love and patience, and kindness as we can go along these journeys of discovery, of identity are always appreciated and really never ending. Because we could keep asking these questions about ourselves for as long as we live, and I'm one to say, we should.

Yvonne Lee: Yes. I agree.

Jason Lee: So whenever you're ready, you can take that 23andMe test and deep dive into your own, but-

Yvonne Lee: Maybe that will be your 50th birthday present, Jason.

Jason Lee: Well, I think that brings us to our guests tonight. We have friends that work, live, and breathe in the adoption space. They bring people together to create new

truths, new legacies, new roots, circles of completion. They are the Forteners, the old fashions of adoption. Shall we give them a call for their cocktail confession?

Yvonne Lee: Let's do it.

Hank Fortener: Hello?

Sueann Fortener: Hi.

Jason Lee: Hi guys. Hi Hank and Sueann Fortener. How are you guys doing?

Hank Fortener: Hey, good to see you guys.

Jason Lee: Good to see you guys.

Yvonne Lee: We are so happy to have you here, and for those who are listening right now, Hank and Sueanne, we go to school together and I knew, and maybe they don't know this. Maybe this is too much that I'm expressing right now. But I knew that when I met them, I was like, "Oh my God, these people are cool." We haven't had as much time to connect because of COVID-

Jason Lee: Global pandemic and everything.

Yvonne Lee: But we did spend some time in a cabin playing adult Uno-

Jason Lee: Wait, what?

Yvonne Lee: And I was like, "Oh man [crosstalk 00:30:58] my friends."

Hank Fortener: That's right, Jason. You should have seen her face when we were like, "[inaudible 00:31:03] play adult Uno?" And she was like, "What did I just get asked by these people?" [crosstalk 00:31:08].

Jason Lee: So I think we're going to spend this entire episode talking about adult Uno. When was this?

Hank Fortener: It didn't occur to me. I was like, "Man, she really kind of weirded out." I was like, "Maybe not everybody likes Uno," And I realized adult Uno sounds so scary [crosstalk 00:31:23]. Yeah. Sounded crazy [crosstalk 00:31:26].

Jason Lee: Welcome to Lagralane Spirits, our podcast. It's great to have you guys on.

Yvonne Lee: And one of the reasons that we wanted you guys to be here is because part of the podcast is about origin stories. And so in it, we talk about adoption and we talk about where we began and where does the history begin and what are the stories around that? And we instantly thought of you when we thought about like, people have heard us speak. And so now we want to be able to have other listeners hear someone else's perspective on that.

Jason Lee: And we thought of no better couple than you guys. And we'd love to hear you guys explain a little bit about your company, your AdoptTogether.

Hank Fortener: Love your story and I love how open you guys are about adoption, because as you know, adoption is a huge part of our life and a huge part of our, just really is a part of our story as a family. We started a charity when I was... on my 30th birthday, we launched it. Sueanne was pregnant with our first daughter and we launched AdoptTogether, which is essentially the world's largest still, and it was the world's first crowdfunding platform for families who are going through the adoption process.

Hank Fortener: So we are a kid starter, as people have joked and called us. We're a kick starter for adoption. We're a nonprofit crowdfunding platform. So if you're donating to a family, you get a tax deduction for a donation to families, you get to donate to a fund that then helps families fund their adoptions. And since we launched on my 30th birthday, I'm about to be 40, which is just an eye opener. A little bit of a, hello. 40 in January. So that'll be our 10th year. And we've helped a little over 6,500 families raise about \$25 million.

Jason Lee: Wow.

Hank Fortener: It's been an amazing run to watch how many adoption stories we've gotten to be a part of and really how many adoption stories that all the donors have been a part of.

Jason Lee: That's extraordinary. That's incredible. That's incredible.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. And I went over your website again and I was so taken aback. I was like, "Wait a minute." I think that maybe it was eight or nine people that you and your family had fostered like 36 children from all of these different countries. And so you're understanding as a family and a different understanding, such a unique understanding and a huge platform of how we could build family, how we create family-

Jason Lee: And what family means, right? I've explored, in my exploration as someone who was adopted and raised in the Midwest. I was born in Nebraska and raised all over Illinois and Minnesota. You say you're 40, I'm 50 in August.

Hank Fortener: Hello.

Jason Lee: Hello.

Hank Fortener: That's a real number right there. That is a real number.

Jason Lee: It's a big one. It's a number-

Hank Fortener: You're ready for adult Uno. You're ready.

Jason Lee: Officially.

Hank Fortener: You're old enough for adult Uno. That's like, you might even graduate to whatever the next version of Uno is.

Jason Lee: The exploration of what family means through the adoption lens means to world to me. I've lived it for almost half a century. I've written a film about it that we'll be rolling out later on this year. It means the world to me, and I know it means the world to you both as well. So we're thrilled to have you here.

Hank Fortener: We're glad to be here.

Jason Lee: I'd love to raise a glass as we do on Lagralane Spirits, and just do a welcome cheer with this nice little clink before we start on up.

Hank Fortener: I'm ready.

Jason Lee: If you guys don't mind, we're going to launch in right away with our first question. So I'm wondering if you guys are ready for your Lagralane Spirits cocktail confession.

Hank Fortener: We're ready. We're confessing too. I got a lot to get off my chest, so I don't know how much time you have, but I got a lot.

Jason Lee: Please, Yvonne, take us away.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Okay. What has been your search for identity? What's it been like for you?

Sueann Fortener: That's a loaded question. That's a five part series right there.

Jason Lee: And some nice cocktail to help us to navigate.

Sueann Fortener: Yeah. My parents immigrated to the United States from Korea and my aunt came first and kind of helped pave the way for all the siblings to come one at a time. And eventually everyone from my dad's side immigrated to LA. So I was born in LA less than a year after they immigrated. And my dad came with \$400 in his pocket. And can still talk about that feeling of landing in LAX and seeing the city. And my dad grew up in a little village in Korea, a teeny tiny town.

Hank Fortener: Where the Olympics were.

Sueann Fortener: That now host the Olympics, but when he was growing up, the winter Olympics, but when he was growing up they used cans for balls, to play ball and-

Hank Fortener: They didn't have windows on their homes, they had plastic.

Sueann Fortener: The paper.

Hank Fortener: They would tape paper on to heat the heat in. And then if something happened and it tore, the whole house would be freezing cold. He grew up that primitive, almost, in terms of the city that he grew up.

Sueann Fortener: And then kind of landing in LAX, seeing the expanse of the city and having \$400 and not knowing really that much English. So I very much grew up with that as the backbone story of us. You know what I mean? Parents who were learning English, who didn't have any real understanding of the culture and trying to forge this life for their kids and my mom not having any of her family here, newly married and having her kid. And so it was very much me having to navigate as a kid, school and explaining that to my parents and how it works, and having to kind of translate and navigate. Here's what we do, and here's how it works.

Sueann Fortener: So I remember being in kindergarten, having kids ask me why I looked the way I did and kind of my first awareness, conscious awareness of being different and how to answer someone's curiosity about that. Bringing Korean food as my lunch to school and the shame that kind of came up as I realized, "Oh, no, oh, no, no, no, no, this is not what you're supposed to bring for lunch." And my mom laboring over this food, but me just wanting wonder bread. And then middle school having someone ask me, "Why can I not see where your eyelashes start?"

Sueann Fortener: Meaning, because I don't have the eyes where you can see kind of the fold, why can't I see where your eyelashes are? Just kind of those very obvious, direct confrontations with identity in terms of physical. My first kind of exploration was the physical part. The part that people could see and kind of navigate that you.

Jason Lee: That's not a microaggression, that's an aggression.

Sueann Fortener: It's curiosity mixed with... and we're in LA. So it's not like I was the only Asian student, but it was still such a minority at the time. And college really trying to figure out how to navigate, not being Korean enough and not being American enough, having that sense of not fitting in either world and not quite be accepted in either world. So we moved to Korea when I was 10 for two years, my dad got transferred for work, and it's crazy to be 10 and land in Korea, go to a foreign school and to feel an immediate connection and a sense of identity and home and belonging in this country I've never been in.

Sueann Fortener: And simultaneously be yelled at, by the cab driver for speaking English and not speaking Korean, and not being proud of my language and my culture and being chastised as kind of this elder generation to the younger generation. And this is in 1988 where you still couldn't get peanut butter in Korea, it was on the black market. And so it was just such a crazy juxtaposition to feel. I don't have words, but I totally identify these are my people, and yet I still don't belong. I finally look like everybody, but I'm still not them.

Sueann Fortener: I remember being at the mall and with my family and my sisters and I kind of talking loudly as you would, as kids, and then just realizing everyone on the escalator has gone silent and is staring at us because we were such novelty back then, as Korean kids who were speaking English. And realizing, "Oh, I'm not like them. I'm very different from them." And yet I still felt that in America because I looked different. You know what I mean?

Yvonne Lee: I actually relate to your story on so many different levels just by being Filipino and being black. And I remember when I was a kid, my mom and my dad sent us to where my dad is from, in Macon, Georgia. And so I'm going from Arizona where mostly I'm only seeing white people and then they flew us there, and I remember being in Macon, Georgia and going, "I've never seen so many black people in my life." And it was the first time that I was like, "Oh, I'm not black like them. I'm not black enough." It was the first time in Arizona, I could tell that people saw me as a black person, even though I'm always holding the hand of my Filipino mom, wherever I went.

Yvonne Lee: And then feeling the sense of home, because when I went to the Philippines for the first time, when I was like eight, my mom bought the tickets for all four of us to go back to the Philippines and to go to her town, not in Manila. This is where like the economics and the socioeconomics kind of go. We didn't go to the big cities. My mom is from the province and so-

Jason Lee: Eastern [inaudible 00:42:03].

Yvonne Lee: Which is very different. Which was probably a lot like where your dad came from.

Jason Lee: Her home similarly to how you were describing it. Yeah, we've been there a couple times. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: So it's interesting. And me and feeling like, oh, getting here and going, "Oh, this is the part of me. That's Filipino." Like, "Oh, this is where it all kind of settled in." Where I begin to identify with who my mom is and where I came from and to figure out what parts of me come through the Filipino culture and then what the parts of me that come through African American culture. So those are the parts of your story that I really connect with when you share the search for [crosstalk 00:42:44].

Sueann Fortener: Yeah. And then it kind of goes into kind of even subculture. There's a culture of Korean Americans in LA. We have our own subculture of being a Korean American LA person. There's a certain way that Korean Americans speak in LA, a certain [inaudible 00:43:03] in their voice and how they say words and sentences and not quite fitting in with that community either. I remember I went on a blind date. I got set up with someone, we talked on the phone, we met up at this restaurant on the west side. And he said, "If I hadn't known your Korean, when we were talking the phone, I would've just thought you were a white girl." So I said, "Oh, please tell me what does a Korean American person sound like?" Obviously that lasted one day [crosstalk 00:43:32].

Jason Lee: Sorry about laughing, but I could imagine how that could have ended.

Sueann Fortener: It was definitely one of the opening statement, so that was awkward. But again, kind of, I confronted with that. "What does it mean to sound white? What does it mean I didn't sound Korean? How do you sound Korean when you're Korean American?" I said, "Are you talking about the way that, how they talk, how we talk and I don't talk like that?" And you know, it just goes even to multiple more

nuanced layers even, of subculture and identity, even within being the umbrella of being Korean.

Jason Lee: Yeah. The Americanization of us all, right? I was adopted in the Midwest, my biological roots are German and West African/Nigerian. And I was raised by a white family in the Midwest. I'm a light skinned mixed race, black man, and identify with this as well because I was way too light to be black and on the south side of Chicago and I certainly was too dark to be white anywhere else in Chicago. And so I identify strongly with the pulls and tugs of what it means to butt up against... well, to be othered basically. To butt up against the dominant culture and to try to navigate and find your way through it.

Hank Fortener: It's so interesting too. And probably not typical, but I'm the white guy on the podcast, who can resonate bizarrely-

Yvonne Lee: Jason is also white. I'm just letting you know, we've got two.

Sueann Fortener: He's biracial.

Hank Fortener: Uniquely. Yeah, yeah. No, I'm just saying, you might look at us and be like, "Oh, okay." And I think I get that at work, I get that in my business. I work in music, and so I work with around rap music and I work around a very diverse group of people that I think might think that. But I was raised by a white family in the Midwest, same as you, but I was raised in a state certified foster home. We fostered over 36 kids over a seven year period, my parents have adopted eight kids from six different countries. So at any given moment, at any given grocery store in the Midwest, which is in Dayton, Ohio, which is either white, black, or Asian, those are the kind of your only, and then there's Indian doctors in neighborhoods. Like it's literally-

Jason Lee: I went to [inaudible 00:45:47] in Springfield, Ohio, I know you're [crosstalk 00:45:51] -

Hank Fortener: Okay, good. I went to Cedarville, which is right around Springfield, and I worked on a helicopter as a medic and we were based out of Springfield. So I know exactly, MedFlight was my Saturday job. But at any given moment at any Kroger or Cub Foods, I would have my little brother on my shoulders who was Chinese. And he had a double cleft lip and palette, so his mouth is wide open. And then I would have my little brother who's black holding my hand, my little sister who's Bolivian holding my other hand, leading the charge, be my little sister who's in charge, who's white and my biological sister who looks like me. So it's like a very, people would look at us and they'd just be like, "Is this some kind of program? What is going on here?" And this is just us on a Saturday.

Hank Fortener: I didn't see it as different, I didn't see it as unique, but I would have these moments where I would see people see us. And that's when I realized, "Oh, my family is really, really different." My mom did not believe in sending us to school. She didn't want us to go to school, she wanted us to stay home and she wanted to homeschool. She felt like school was going to keep our thinking too binary and it wasn't going to teach us to see the world differently. Not only was I at a

Walmart on a Monday at 10:00 AM, which no other kid was, but we were surrounded by different ethnicities that other people were not used to seeing. I think it was just that same sense of like, I resonate so much with, when you say like, "I didn't belong."

Hank Fortener: I felt the corporate feeling. When I was years old, my mom pulled us aside and said, "We're going to be foster parents." And I was like, "Cool, whatever. I'm seven. You guys do whatever you want. Do your [crosstalk 00:47:30]." My parents were like 28, I think at the time. They're were like, "No, no, no. We need you to be in the mix on this. You have to be in the center of this as well." And so I just took that on seriously. And so at any given in moment, there'd be six, seven of us walking through a Walmart at 10:00 AM on a Monday and people would go, "All right, something here's happening." And I just always felt different, I always felt odd. I was odd when I was a kid because of my family makeup and who was at my baseball game and I would meet people who were only children. And I'd be like, "Your life wants these so dope. What does a day look like? You just hang with your parents? What do you do all day?"

Hank Fortener: I had at any given moment, seven or eight, 10 brothers and sisters. I have 10 brothers and sisters now, there was always humans with us. So I didn't know, even though we were homeschooled, I was so exposed to so many different lives, and so many different people and so many different birth mothers in our home. And so many different foster mothers in our home or birth mothers who were there when we were fostering and we would meet them in parks. And I was exposed to so many different broad cultures, that just I didn't belong when we went to the black church when I was a kid, I didn't belong when I went to baseball because I didn't go to the school.

Hank Fortener: I didn't really fit in. As I got older, I became a pastor. So when you're a pastor, you really don't fit. You're the guy that's not sleeping around, you're the guy who's not getting hammered. So that didn't really fit as a 23 year old in Los Angeles. Now I'm in music business, I'm not from the music business. I got into the music, and so I didn't grow up doing what these guys all did to get into the music business. So I think there is that sense, I really resonating, Jason, when you talk about other, I just think you kind of carry that with yourself of like, there is an other.

Hank Fortener: And I hope now, we're getting to a place in a culture where there is no in or out. It's just, you're in by being other. There's so many of us now who've had an experience of not fitting in with our environment or I didn't follow all the... so you just go, "Man, everybody's other." Even though you might look at my life, you might look at me in five minutes and be like, "Oh, you've probably..." Fill in the blank. It looks like I've fit into all my little circles, but it's been the opposite. I have found one place where I've been like, "Oh, cool." I have not even been to the moment like with Sueanne had, when she got to Korea and been like, "These are my people." I feel that now, when I walk into a studio with rappers. I work in music and resonate with it. Does that make sense? I just feel like-

Jason Lee: No, it absolutely does.

Hank Fortener: [crosstalk 00:50:03] new world, a new global citizen is as a person who feels like, I [inaudible 00:50:08] humans.

Jason Lee: That's what's shaking all the way, not to go political, but to go macro for a second, it seems like it's shaking all the way up into the political space here in the States right now, right? That there is this kind of last attempt to hold onto to whatever this is while we all go, "Well, wait a second. We all have these various experiences that we navigated through our lives in the spaces that we are in, that don't represent what that is. And so let's recreate what this is. Hank, I got to ask you, man. We talked about this before, but I would love to hear from your lens, if you don't mind sharing this, what made your parents do this in Dayton, Ohio? What was that, from your lens and from their lens, if you don't mind sharing, what was that about? What was that like?

Hank Fortener: My mom and dad got pregnant when they were in college. And so being a Catholic family in the Midwest, we're having a wedding. That's like, you don't really get engaged, you just get pregnant. That's sort of the way it goes. And so they got pregnant and got married, had a child, had another one, which was myself. So I had then my sister and then me and then had my little brother and pregnancy was brutal on my mom. And so they said, "Hey, we just need to..." My mom got her tubes tied when she had her third child, which was my little brother. And she sat in the recovery room, she just sobbed and just said, "I was put on this earth to be a mother. I can't by any means, how could I have done this? What have I done?" Even though that was really not healthy for her to have more our children.

Hank Fortener: And what's so interesting is my dad had found out a year earlier that his dad was adopted and his dad came to him when he was pregnant with my little sister and said, "Hey, I just want you to know," my dad was 21, 22 at the time. He said, "Hey, I just want you to know I'm adopted." And I think he was saying something about, there was a kid that had been born. My dad's cousin had had a child who had severe deformities and real trouble with the pregnancy. And he pulled my dad aside as a dad and said, "Hey, just so you know, I'm adopted. We're not actually biologically related to your cousin. So you don't have to worry about it." And again, this is in the early, early 1980s, 1970s.

Hank Fortener: So there's not a lot of knowledge, except all you knew is if someone has trouble, we're all going to have trouble. It was, that was just the knowledge. Sounds like that was the way my dad found out that his dad was adopted. And so he, on that moment said he remembers having that thought and telling my mom really is to comfort her, "We're going to adopt. It's okay, we're going to adopt." My mom didn't know anyone adopted. She'd never been in that world. And my mom said, "Okay." And that like solidified for her, "We're bringing kids into our family." Well-

Sueann Fortener: That's how I'm going to continue to be a mother.

Hank Fortener: Yeah. She's always said, "I wanted to have a hundred kids. I want to have 10 kids. God put me on earth to be a mom. This is what I want to do." And turns out

adoption is expensive and complicated, but foster care, man, we live in the city of Los Angeles. If you called the city of Los Angeles right now on a Friday evening and said, "Hey, we have our home study. We've been approved to be a family." They won't let you off the phone. They'll say, "We have a child right now that needs a family." And they'll bring someone to your household.

Hank Fortener: Foster care is a need in every city in the United States. And there's over 500,000 kids in foster care in the United States. Over a thousand of which just in Los Angeles county that are what's called available for adoption, which means the parental rights have been terminated, and they are looking for their forever home. So my mom made a phone call and literally within 48 hours my little sister hope was in our household. She was our foster child. And she had fetal alcohol syndrome. And her mom had all sorts of challenges that she was trying to face. And when Hope's mother, her name was Melissa met my mom. She said, "You're going to adopt my baby."

Hank Fortener: My mom's like, "Well, that's not really how this works. This is a very like..." And it was complicated because it's foster care in the '80s, and my mom said, "Okay." And then thought that was how the adoption process worked. There was no internet at the time, there's not even like a newspaper on this. And the social workers started helping her. And we adopted my little sister Hope, which was one of our first foster kids. And then, so my mom was like, "Oh, that's how it works." So we fostered and fostered and fostered and almost every time tried to move to adoption, and that's not always the case. And reunification is always foster care is first.

Hank Fortener: Foster care is designed as an in between space to reunify family. So wherever that was possible, we would step aside and say, "Of course, absolutely." So that's kind of what that seven year period was for my family. And we discovered how the back and forth of foster care, by the time a kid in the United States turns 18 in the foster care system, if they age out, they've been in an average of 55 foster homes. So we watched that uncertainty happen to young children. And even as us as bio kids, being in the household and realizing like, we can't have kids come in and out. I'd come down to the breakfast table and there would be somebody new at the breakfast table.

Hank Fortener: And I'd be like, "Hey, who's this?" While I was asleep, someone else showed up and you get a little jaded as a 10 year old, 12 year old, because you're like, "Well, what if I come down tomorrow morning and someone's not here?" Which happened also. And so-

Sueann Fortener: Which is very traumatic, [crossatalk 00:55:40] to so many siblings.

Hank Fortener: It's just too much. And my mom just saw it, that's a disservice to the kids to come into this household, that's like a summer camp and literally looks kind of like Lord of the Flies. We didn't ever like eat dinner as a family, we kind of just, there's open boxes of cereal everywhere, and what if someone ate nobody's... someone's blood sugar goes low, "So fine. We'll feed you." It was very summer camp. It was [inaudible 00:56:06] every day and sort of expose a child to that

lifestyle and then have them leave, wasn't healthy for us or them. And so that's when my parents decided to adopt.

Yvonne Lee: You know what I find so interesting in terms of identity and it actually teaches me a lesson. And it's just the way that I walk through the world because I'm a woman, I'm a woman of color and I'm trying to survive, right? Seeing you, let's say seeing you step onto the campus of our school and you, I would've never known anything, those things about you. I would've made so many assumptions because you're a white male, about why we go to an independent school. I've made so many assumptions about like, "Oh," and I just make them about every white person that comes on the campus, and I'm just telling you my truth.

Jason Lee: People make assumptions about people.

Yvonne Lee: That's what I do. I mean, I have enough life experience to understand that what I've done is made an assumption. I don't know anything until I talk to you. Do you know what I'm saying?

Jason Lee: That's power of the story. Power of communicating.

Yvonne Lee: So it's okay. I understand that that's part of life that people make assumptions about someone else's identity and how they come into the world. But you have such a unique situation that is different than these kinds of assumptions that I make, where I assume in an independent school setting that these other people that I see as white, maybe they're not, I'm just saying, that's what we do. That is much more varied and much more interconnected than what my assumption is. And so it proves to me in this way, that the more as we are developing our identities and developing our children's identities, or allowing them the space to have that as it will change over time, having all different kinds of people interacting in their lives, how that changes it.

Yvonne Lee: I know that for me being black Filipino, growing up in Arizona, visiting the Philippines, being able to travel just a bit, all of those things have affected me in a way that if I just said, "Oh, because the way the world sees me is that I'm a black girl." I had to define that for myself and so, I mean, as you tell your story, I see the world trying to tell you, even with Sueanne's story, the world trying to tell you who you are and you trying to say, "Wait a minute, yes, but no." [crosstalk 00:58:37] You know what I mean? Like, "Is that what you see? Because that's not what I feel. That's not who I am." And that constant struggle back and forth, just the way that our country is created.

Hank Fortener: Yeah. And growing up as a white kid in the '90s, or even early in the '80s. When someone met me and had an assumption, and then they tried to pull me aside and tell me a black joke, and I'm like, "You don't know..." My level of offense and upset is as if you said it to a person of color because my little brother who's in the car waiting for me during this baseball practice, or the amount of things that you just go, "You have no..." And that's what I think reveals a person's assumption of who you are, I think that's when I realize like, "Oh, they think I'm

like them." I'm just a white kid from two white parents in some there's just a couple of... there's nothing on with that.

Hank Fortener: Just you start to realize like, "Oh, people put me in that box," so they try to sneak in a joke thinking, "Oh, I'll laugh at this too." And here I am giving this kid like a nine minute speech on how inappropriate what he just... to one point where my baseball coach had to pull me aside and be like, "Hey," they just break us up because I was like, "Do you have any idea... I just was launching into this pontification of what that little racist thing, you used the word earlier, Jason, a microaggression, that's just racist jokes. Like, "You're saying that about my family, dude."

Hank Fortener: Aside from the fact that that's unhealthy and we won't get into your family, that's not the only thing for my... and I would just launch into those things. And so I think you're totally right. Is you have these moments, I think, when you're searching for your identity where you see how other people see you and that's the like, aha moment of like, "Oh, got it. I feel different than that. And I resonate different than that. And I have different allegiances. I don't have whatever allegiance you're trying to build with me right now by telling this joke. Just to be clear, I'm not in your club." And I would do my best to make sure they knew that doesn't work for me.

Jason Lee: Hank, I identify with that strongly because my brother and sister, my older brother and sister blonde hair, blue eye. My sister is eight months older than me, we were raised as twins. They've told similar stories. My brother went to college in Fort Worth, Texas, similar stories, similar like, "Hold up, you don't know me and my family. So you better back up right now." We lived in the Philippines. Ironically, years later, we met and I married into the Philippines and that's connected, but my family lived in Manila in 1980 and we took a child in.

Jason Lee: And so I'm identifying with what you were talking about in the foster space. We had a young, younger boy who's about five or six, I was 10, who my family was considered... We were fostering while we were there, the mothers stepped in and stopped the adoption from happening. You can't talk to my sister to this day about this child. She tells me she was like, "Jason, I opened my heart up to you. You're my brother, I opened my heart up to that boy too. And then, he's no longer my brother. How does that compute?" I identify with a lot of what has just been discussed here right now, strongly.

Yvonne Lee: Okay. That brings us to our second question. Hold on a second [crosstalk 01:02:07].

Hank Fortener: Let me say one other thing about that because I think there's another, I had to do both... I had to play both roles, right? One is, I'm yelling at my kid at a baseball field when I'm 10 years old because he tells me a racist joke, he thinks I'm going to think is funny. The next is, I'm trying to explain to my 15 year old brother, why he can't hide in the bushes and scare me in this rich white neighborhood in Naples, Florida. Because he sees me do it to my family, we used to this joke. We would walk around this town in Florida and I'll hide in the

bushes and like pop out and scare them, which is funny. And I'll tell him, "I don't know how to explain this to you and try to explain that world to you. I can get away with that and you cannot, you can't be in someone's back you yard and be tall and handsome and black."

Hank Fortener: And my little brother is like, "What are you talking about? I just watched you do it." I'm like, "Let me tell you the difference." And my heart breaks into 50 pieces trying to explain to him like, "I know, but they'll respond to me differently in their backyard. If they come outside and see me, they might even laugh with me. That's not safe for you." And I'd watch it with my little brother when I walk into a 7-Eleven, and he walks into a 7-Eleven and I watch people keep an eye on him. And here I am walking around and I've watched the different interactions and watch somebody ask him and challenge him when he is buying something, when he's touching something.

Hank Fortener: And for me to walk over and again, give that person the speech that they didn't wake up that morning thinking they were going to receive. But does that make sense? And I don't know if your family [crosstalk 01:03:42], Jason, I felt that you stand in the in between in that world. And you're like, "I can't explain this to you in a way and the world is broken in that way," and having to explain that to your little brother and have him realize like, "Oh, that..." Now him see, "This is how other people see me." You know what I mean? And I had to kind of guide him in that.

Jason Lee: I want to say that that's American, right? That's an Americana element. But I had an experience vacationing with my family, step family and my adopted family, which is a story for another episode. But we were in Cabo in the mid '90s, we're all college age and we're going to the Cabo bars in like 94, 95. And I'm trailing behind everyone, I had a big family as well, I was the youngest of three and then the youngest of seven. And so we were all on this big winter break trip and we're all going to a bar as you do on winter break in with your family in Cabo. The Mexican police stopped me because they thought I was trailing this family.

Jason Lee: And I had to, in my broken Spanglish, [inaudible 01:04:47], I had to let them know that they were my family, and it took me about 40... my family didn't clock that I was not there for whatever reason, which is another story, because anything could have happened that night to me with the Mexican police. But finally I convinced them that I was indeed, that I was allowed to go into the bar. And I went in and proceeded to drink shot after shot of tequilas because that was messed up what just happened. And so those, those moments, aren't just, I want to say it's like, oh America, but it's North America. It's a global problem.

Yvonne Lee: You know what you guys, what I'm also interested in is you guys have this life experience and then like, how do we, with our kids, how do we allow them this space to kind of be able to have these kinds of conversations and have them be on their search for identity while we're still trying to figure our shit out? We're still trying to, as we go along in the world changes, we're constantly trying to figure those kinds of things out because of what our kids teach us. Jason has a story of when he was on the search for his identity and what that was like. So I

kind of want him to share that with you guys, because I'm also curious about all of these kids that were fostered and all these kids that your family adopted and what is it like for third journey to find identity?

Jason Lee: And we had touched on, Hank right before, we had talked about this earlier and these reveals, right? And I'm going to share a reveal. This episode revolves around the origin of us all and we're drinking an Old-Fashioned because an Old-Fashioned in my studies, in my of bartending studies is one of the original cocktails. In origin, there is a starting point, right? As an adopted child, I didn't know the starting point to try to make that kind of connection to why we're drinking and Old-Fashioned. I knew I was black and white. I was born in 1971 Lincoln, Nebraska, that my origin story. My identity was built around being adopted for the longest time before I learned and gained knowledge of my own biological story.

Jason Lee: I met my birth mother in 2002. I lost my adopted mom in the same year. My birth mother... and this is before ancestry.com. This is before 23andMe, this is before FamilyTreeDNA, all of the African Ancestry, all of the DNA tests that I now spit and vials for fun to get information from. It's kind of a hobby of mine now to gain all that information. But it's been, and I say that both tongue in cheek and seriously, because I've learned so much about my origin story from these websites, but I met my birth mother back in 2002 by driving to Lincoln, Nebraska, going to the Department of Health and Human Services, paying a \$17 fee to open up my closed adoption papers.

Jason Lee: They called my biological grandmother because my birth mother was a minor at the time. So her name was and information, the phone number was still the same, Lincoln, Nebraska. She called my birth mother and said, "He's looking for you." So I started a relationship with my birth mother. She told me the story, she told me her story of my origin story 20 years ago. There's another man she was dating before I was born, ended up going to serve in Vietnam. He came back four years later, she had moved. She had run away. She had moved to the East Coast. Had gotten married, came back in the mid '70s with another child, her child, her daughter, and was raising her child.

Jason Lee: And so I had his name. And so that was my origin story. I reached out and connected eventually with him. He lives in Kansas and this gentleman believed that story too, was told that same story too. Valentine's day 2021 on ancestry.com, I get a message from a first, they listed in an algorithm that you can get as close as first cousin or someone even a close relative. I have like two of them, everyone else is like fifth cut as in twice 18th removed, right? But this was someone as close as an aunt who did not fit that story, 20 years, I believed the story that I was told.

Jason Lee: It turns out the story was a lie. My birth mother has admitted that, and we are communicating about what that lie was about, why that lie was. I'm having an interesting time processing what that is about because I was given up for adoption 50 years ago and then I was lied to 20 years ago. My biological father, who I found out this year is the real father, the birth father passed away in 2018.

I met the other gentleman who I now call my godfather because we've become cool. We're buds, we're talking about sports, seven years. He's a Chiefs fan, the Chiefs got really good. I'm a Bears fan, we're not that good. So he's like, "You could be a Chiefs fan." I'm like, "I know, I want to." But it's a whole thing about sports.

Jason Lee: But so that is my big reveal in this episode from an origin place and what this is about, and I'm grateful for the time to share this knowing the impact and import and what this subject matter means to both in your family. It's just been a wild reveal. I'm like, "Why did you lie? What were you trying to protect me of? If that was it." But then I don't want to judge, I don't want to walk in the shoes of a child 50 years ago who had a one night stand with a guy and I'm the product of, right? So exploring what that origin means for me as a man, as a father, as a husband.

Yvonne Lee: But that also that you had spent, and as the wife of someone who's been-

Jason Lee: Who's been deep diving in this-

Yvonne Lee: ... on this journey, experiencing the emotional investment in finding out who am I. And as a history major part of our-

Jason Lee: And the storyteller too.

Yvonne Lee: Right. And part of our second question of our cocktail confessions is, and I'm curious how you guys deal with that, Hank...Oh, sorry.

Jason Lee: I'm sorry. Real quick. Before we go into the second question, Hank, I was wondering if we had touched a little bit about a big reveal that you had. And I'm wondering if you would feel comfortable now sharing what we had originally started talking about earlier.

Hank Fortener: Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Because I think, when you talk adoption, it's so interesting that you, and even what we've touched on this podcast, which is people can look at you and see you in a certain way and make assumptions about you. But you've been make assumptions out your own story. Like Jason, you made assumptions because you're told this as a kid, right? I found out when I was younger, my mom would tell me, "Adoption's been in our story for a long time." In 1929, my grandfather was adopted. My dad found that out. So on my dad's side, I've always known that there was adoption, but we've always tried to piece that story together, because he had little information.

Hank Fortener: So about, I don't know, 10, 12 years ago we started doing 23andMe, and recently I've logged in because it tells you, you have relatives. We found other relatives, we found cousins. So I just logged in randomly. Haven't done it in years, I've logged in two days ago. And I'd log in and I have... it pinged that I have a cousin on my mom's grandfather's side. And I was like, "Where did that come...." Because that's the only person in that whole chain. So on the other side, so on my grandfather's side, I found like 20 cousins and I've been messaging all of them trying to discover, who is this woman, Pauline who chose

adoption for my grandfather? Who were her parents? Did she have other kids? We don't really know. And she passed away before I was old enough to discover. So every-

Sueann Fortener: And she had a relationship with her son, actually.

Hank Fortener: She used to follow my grandfather to school. When he was like in fifth grade, and she would drive and just follow him. And he thought he was being stalked. And then she stopped him one day-

Sueann Fortener: She called the house.

Hank Fortener: And asked for his phone number and he gave it to her, said he felt uncomfortable. His name was Chuck Charles. And so then she called the house one day and said, "I'm looking for Charles." And he said, "This is me." This is in the '30s. And she said, "I'm your mother. I chose adoption for you when you were born. And I'd like to have coffee with you, would you meet me downtown?" And he said, "Yes." Didn't tell his adoptive parents, because again, his adoptive parents had not told him that he was adopted, in the '20s that was very like... they were worried about their own self. They were worried about him feeling different. And so he personally kept that story to himself, maintained a secret relationship with his biological mother until his adopted parents died.

Hank Fortener: And that's when he told the rest of his family, "Pauline is not just a friend of ours. She's actually my biological mother." He kept it a secret because he didn't want to hurt his parents. His adoptive parents didn't want to communicate anything. So he just took all that on for himself. So we got a little bit of information, but to hear from all of these people, all these cousins say, "Hey, I've got this grandmother and I've got this grandmother," and for us to piece together Pauline's story over 23andMe has been amazing. Because even though I'm a bio kid, so I'm not adopted, but because your grandfather's adopted and that's what I mean, Jason, the more you dig in now, the more your kids won't need to.

Hank Fortener: The more your kids can discover your story and your background. And I feel like I'm doing the things my grandfather has since passed. So I can't even ask him, "Hey, what was Pauline's mother's name and how many kids did Pauline..." I'm finding out all of these things. Or even today, and this is my reveal is today I got a message from a gentleman named John on my family tree. And it sparked off where I said, "That couple didn't have kids, who is this person?" And I messaged him and said, "Hey, I'm trying to decipher our family tree." And he said, well, I'm trying to decipher it too, my daughter got me on this. I'm adopted. And he said, "So I'm just an outsider looking in, I hope you can find what you're looking for." And I messaged him and said, "I don't want to try into this stranger's life, but you are literally my cousin. And I'm trying to map all this for my kids."

Hank Fortener: And so we messaged probably 30 times today comparing names, I'm texting my great aunt. I'm texting people going, "Do you know this person's name?" And so it's just so interesting how, even if you're not adopted, if adoption has touched

your life, you're never the same. You'll always be in that story kind of recreation mode. Does that make sense or does that resonate with you where you're just going-

Jason Lee: Deeply.

Hank Fortener: I'm just trying find out.

Jason Lee: Deeply, deeply. My aunt, how my reveal happened is she popped up as close as my aunt, literally on ancestry.com. And this is in 2018 and I was like, "Well, this doesn't make sense." My birth father is Mike, do you know a Mike Warren in your family line?" She's like, "No." I'm like, "Well, okay, we'll find it somehow." Because I didn't have reason to doubt the story I was told because Mike himself believed it. So I was like, "Okay, this is what it is." Well, it turns out that she's indeed my aunt and her brother, my birth father passed away in 2018. There's a family reunion in Florida on the Panhandle next year that they're inviting me to, she's like, "If your parents had lived, and they knew you were there, they would've brought you in." That's just how my parents were. My brother was [crosstalk 01:16:59] kind of wild. He was running around-

Hank Fortener: And this is the white family or this is the black family?

Jason Lee: Black family.

Hank Fortener: Wow.

Jason Lee: So my whole search revolved around going out to find my black side really, as somebody was raised by a white family, I was like, "Y'all are white, I love you. You're great. But I got an afro and dark skin, what's up?" I had to go out and find my black side. My first location was my German Jewish, which was wonderful in a reveal, but not my black side. And so I kept searching and found first, this first gentleman who was a black guy, who was her boyfriend at the time, who believed the story. So they were intimate for all the various obvious reasons. But then I found this new side.

Jason Lee: So his people were from Louisiana and Oklahoma. So I did a whole deep dive historically into how you get from Louisiana to Oklahoma. But then I found out that this dude was from, my biological father is actually from South Carolina and Georgia. Which is where her dad-

Sueann Fortener: He said Georgia.

Yvonne Lee: My dad is from Macon, Georgia and I said, "Jason, we better not be related. We better not be-"

Hank Fortener: Oh, no.

Jason Lee: To our audience, we're not. But so yeah, what you just said, Hank resonates deeply within me for all the various reasons. Like when you were commenting

on, what hit me so strong with is even if you are a biological child and adoption has touched you somehow, it has touched you deeply and profoundly.

Hank Fortener:

Yeah. Without a doubt.

Jason Lee:

Thanks [inaudible 01:18:34]. This was so awesome.

Yvonne Lee:

Really, truly. I listen to a lot of podcasts and I always love the conversation. That's why we're so excited to do what we're doing right now. I just appreciate all the vulnerability that you guys brought to it, all the stories that you've told, which maybe you've told a million times, maybe you've only told them to us right now, but they feel so very, very true and very real.

Hank Fortener:

Thank you guys so much for having us.

Jason Lee:

Cheers my friends. This was beautiful. We thank you both. Love you both very much. This was awesome.

Yvonne Lee:

What we're made of, who we come from and why, are what little boys and girls hold on to, because it is these truths we hold to be, self evident. Please join us for part two of our three part series on origins. In part two, we interview Channing Power, as she shares her origin story of how she became a mom.

Yvonne Lee:

This podcast is produced by the Lagralane Group. We would like to thank Lagralane Spirits co-producers and writers, Courtney [inaudible 01:19:47], and Pepper Chambers Soraci, Co-producer Matthew Soraci, podcast coordinator, Amanda [Densmore 01:19:53], sound designer, David B [Marlen 01:19:55], the launch guild and Toby Gad for his original piano improvisation.

Jason Lee:

We'd also like to thank Podcast Haven and our guests, the Forteners of AdoptTogether. Remember to grab our Old-Fashioned recipe in show notes by going to lagralanespirits.com and we'll see you next time. And if you love the cocktail or the episode, make sure you rate review and subscribe on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen.