

Heart and Seoul

By Rick Reilly

Olympic medals can lead to riches, fame or a new girlfriend. They can lead to a job, a life or an appearance on the Today show. But Toby Dawson hopes his leads to something else—his birthparents. Left on the front stoop of a police station as a toddler and then placed in an orphanage in Seoul, Toby was adopted at age three by two Vail ski instructors, Deb and Mike Dawson. They had him skiing by four. He was beating them down the mountain by nine.

In those days he never thought about being the only Asian kid in powder white Vail. Never wondered who his blood parents might be. Never wanted to know, even though his brother, K.C.—also adopted—flew to Seoul 10 years ago and met his. Toby hated hearing about that meeting. The man in Korea wanted K.C. to call him father. Nuh-uh. No way.

Whether it was fear of the unknown or love of his adopted parents, Dawson showed no curiosity about the subject. Didn't ever go by his Korean middle name—Soo Chul. Complained when his parents dragged him to Korean Heritage Camp. Didn't want to be anything other than a “blond-haired, blue-eyed regular American kid” he says, “All I cared about was skiing.”

Problem was, Toby (Awesome) Dawson got too good. Started winning World Cup events in the freestyle moguls. Pretty soon the planet started noticing him. And people sure as hell noticed he wasn't blond-haired and blue-eyed.

“I'm your father”, Koreans e-mailed. “I'm your mother.” “I'm your cousin.”

And Dawson's response was always the same: Get bent. “I think he was blocking it out” says Deb “Which was too bad. Because his dream was the Olympics, but mine was that the Olympics would be how he'd find his parents”.

Then something happened. Asked to return to the Korean Heritage Camp he so hated as a kid, he went and discovered something within himself.

Note: This article is printed with permission from Rick Reilly, Sports Illustrated, “Life of Reilly” column. Rick also serves on the Creative Adoptions Board of Directors.



Above. Rick Reilly pictured with his children, Kellen (top middle), Jake (far right) and Rae (front).

Suddenly he wanted to know who he was. “There was such a buzz with the kids there”, he recalls. “A lot of them had already found their birth parents. Some of the stories were amazing.”

One of the stories he heard was my daughter's.

We adopted Rae at four months, and she was the anti-Toby. She thought constantly about her birth mother, who had to be a princess. Or a movie star.

So when she was 11, we flew to Seoul, even though we were told that her birth mother would not meet with us. Unwed, she'd sneaked away at 16 to have the baby, and only her sister knew. She was married now with three kids, and she dared not be discovered. Any yet—the interpreter told us—not a day went by that she didn't think of Rae.

Finally, she agreed to 30 stolen minutes, in a coffee shop two hours from her home. We waited three hours. Rae looked heartsick. Finally, a cell phone rang. She'd meet us in the alley. And suddenly, there she was, tiny and white-faced. She climbed into our van. She looked at everybody but Rae. She said she had 10 minutes.

“Rae” I said, “if you have any questions for your birth mother, ask them now”. Rae took out a folded piece of paper we didn't know she had.

Question 1. *Why did you give me up?* “Great shame,” the woman told the interpreter, never looking at Rae. Two: *Where's my father?* “Don't know.” Finally a shocker. Three: *“When you had me, did you get to hold me?”*

The birth mother hung her head. No. And that's when the interpreter said, “Well, you can now.”

That broke the woman. She wheeled on Rae and swallowed her in her arms and kisses and sobs. Maybe the only people crying harder in that van were my wife and I. She wouldn't let Rae go. Finally, she had to. We haven't seen her since. Rae was beaming, “It feels like it fixed a little hole in my heart,” she said.

So when Toby Dawson shredded the Turin freestyle course last week, beating his more ballyhooed teammate, Jeremy Bloom and winning a stunning bronze, his picture ran in nearly every South Korean newspaper and on every TV station. Somewhere, maybe his birthmother has read his story and seen him for the first time in more than 25 years, shouting, “Oh, my God! That's my son!”

Only now, at last, Dawson is open to a meeting. “I think it'd be cool,” he says. “I'd like to be friends.”

He's got lots of possibilities. Since winning the medal, Dawson seems to have more long-lost parents than a Powerball winner. But so far, nobody's agreed to a blood test.

I hope somebody does. I hope Dawson makes it over this last one mogul. Because an Olympic medal can fix a lot of things, but not little holes in the heart.

