

MARIE LEE: I made cheerleading, Alice hollered when she got home. Oh, Alice, said her mother. I'm so proud of you. You're a real cheerleader? Asked her fifth grade sister Mary with her eyes wide with awe. Yep, said Alice. Mina made it too. That's absolutely wonderful, Mrs. Larson said, taking the Saran wrap off a plate of chocolate chip cookies. She laid the cookies next to the pitcher of milk sitting on the kitchen table. Then she gave Alice a big hug.

Oh, not to change the subject, Mrs. Larson said, but I meant to tell you that Mrs. Johnsrud, the lady from the Lutheran Adoption Services Agency, called today to let us know that a Korean family is going to move up to Boehner. Does this have something to do with Camp Kimchi or something? Alice asked, a little uneasily.

Well, you know how Mrs. Johnsrud thinks the camp is a good idea, Mrs. Larson went on. She also thought that meeting the Korean family would be a good way for you to start to learn about Korean culture. Alice knew Mrs. Johnson only as some lady in Minneapolis who occasionally sent her these flyers for Korean culture camp that they held every summer up north for Korean adoptees. Even though her mother and father had encouraged her to go, it was only for a week. She just wasn't interested, and her parents said the decision was hers.

I already told her I'm not interested in Korea, Alice said firmly. She didn't like to think of herself as being adopted, period. It made her feel funny, especially when people called Mary the real daughter, as though being from Korea made her, Alice, a fake. I know I look Korean, Alice went on, taking a bite out of a cookie, but I don't feel Korean at all. I feel totally American, like you, dad, and Mary.

That's good, honey, Mrs. Larson said gently, then added. Mrs. Johnsrud was just trying to help. I know, Alice said. She tried to sound agreeable, although she couldn't possibly like some lady whose sole purpose in life seemed to be to remind her that she was adopted.

We'll wait until the family actually moves in before we figure out what we're going to do, Mrs. Larson said. I just thought you'd like to know. Thanks, mom, Alice said, as she and her little blonde-haired sister continued to munch on the chocolate chip cookie. She couldn't wait until her father came home, so she could tell him about cheerleading.

On Wednesday, Alice and Mina walked into their home room and saw the new kid in there. Mrs. Choquette, their homeroom teacher, ushered him to the front of the room, the way she always did for all the new students. He stared at the floor. This is Yoon Jun Lee from Seoul, Korea, she said. He's a Joon Goon, yelled Travis Jones, the class bully from the back of the room. A few kids snickered. Alice felt her face grow hot. She didn't want to have anything to do with a country that gave its people such strange names.

Mr. Jones, please raise your hand next time, Mrs. Choquette said crisply. And his name is Yoon Jun Lee. She wrote it on the blackboard in large letters. I want you to make sure you pronounce it correctly, she said, and smiled at the rest of the class. Let's all give Yoon Jun a big Bayner Junior High welcome. The class clapped politely and pretty loudly. Yoon Jun continued to stare at the floor.

Today, Alice noticed, he was wearing glasses, and he really did have little red pimples all over his face. She thought you couldn't get acne until you were at least 13. Mina and Alice looked at each other and shrugged. Maybe there's something wrong with him, Alice whispered. Like he's special ed or something. Mina stared at him one more time as Mrs. Choquette ushered him back to his seat.

Hey, you're Korean, aren't you, Alice? Mina said suddenly. Alice's mouth went dry like sandpaper for a second. No, she said quickly. I'm not really. Like I'm not the same kind. I'm American. Her friend looked at her with a hint of questions still left in her eyes. But by then, the bell was ringing, and it was time to go to class.

SPEAKER: It's tough when you're in junior high to say, I have an identity.

MARIE LEE: Right.

SPEAKER: And here, Alice is really struggling with that, isn't she?

MARIE LEE: I think seventh grade is the time when you want to gracefully sort of ooze into everybody else.

SPEAKER: And she's having trouble with that.

MARIE LEE: The undeniable fact for Alice is that even though her parents are White and she feels White or American, so to speak, in every way, she does look different than her family.

SPEAKER: That also was a theme in your earlier book, *Finding My Voice*.

MARIE LEE: That's right.

SPEAKER: The theme of difference.

MARIE LEE: When you're growing up in an all-White environment, as Ellen the character in *Finding My Voice* did, you tend to take your cues from what you see around you. I.e. if all your friends and teachers are White, in a sort of strange way, you start to think of yourself as being White also. And then when somebody calls you a racist name or say something like Yoon Jun comes into town, you have this sudden sort of cognitive dissonance where you feel White, but you know you're not, but you start to feel anxious about that.

SPEAKER: How do the rest of the classmates deal with this issue? This obviously was an issue for Travis in this case. He was kind of the bully. How do they deal with that? How do you resolve this?

MARIE LEE: With Alice, she's grown up in this town in her entire life. And as small town Minnesotans know, you can make yourself a part of this place. And for Yoon Jun, not only is he the outside person coming into town, the new kid in school. But he's very different. He's from Korea. He doesn't speak English very well. And to all the kids, he represents everything that's foreign, including, say, having acne and being a little overweight.

SPEAKER: So he has problems that kids have that are universal.

MARIE LEE: Right. And in his case, his being Korean is what Alice fixates on about why people don't like him at first. And it makes her feel anxious because she feels that will somehow translate into people not liking her.

SPEAKER: How much of this sort of inside internal debate that comes out in the characters in your books comes out of Marie Lee's life growing up in Hibbing?

MARIE LEE: Well, there are two things. First in the most universal sense, as an adolescent, you always feel you're the odd person out. You don't feel very good about things. And oddly, sometimes when I talk to some of my high school friends who are very popular in high school and I felt had it all, talked about how they didn't like growing up in Hibbing, or they didn't like the way things were in high school. They thought people were unfriendly to them.

Where I always felt being Asian, I was different, and that I stood out, and this was my cross to bear, versus the feeling of difference. And then secondly, there's the feeling when you're Asian, even though you might be as American as can be, there are always be people who don't feel that you're American and won't let u be that.

SPEAKER: Kristi Yamaguchi felt that I think after the Olympics.

MARIE LEE: Oh, definitely. And you can see how her buddy, Nancy Kerrigan, even though she came in third I believe, suddenly getting all the endorsements. And there's definitely something going on with that.

SPEAKER: I'm curious about the audience. For whom are you writing?

MARIE LEE: First and foremost, I'm writing for myself. And I tend to think I'm writing these books that I wished I had when I was in high school. And now that it's out, I feel very close to the Asian community. When people have had these experiences, and people will tell me that they feel I've been writing about their life on one hand. And then on the other hand, I also feel when people have grown up, for instance, as Whites, and felt, would say to me, oh, I didn't realize you had these problems growing up. And to the extent that that's an education, and that's a broadening of what people know, I guess in a nutshell, my audience is for everybody.

SPEAKER: How would this book if it hadn't been for Yoon Jun and *Finding My Voice*? How would they have helped you when you were growing up in Hibbing?

MARIE LEE: First and foremost, it would have helped me realize that I wasn't alone. And secondly, going back to the question of how people are in high school, cruelty is always wrong. But in a strange way, I felt that the racism I was experiencing was just something that was a part of growing up.

I didn't realize, as I do now obviously, that racism is wrong, and it's something you have to confront. And I felt I was very passive. In many instances, I just let things slide where if I knew what I knew now, I would have said something.

SPEAKER: Well, now that what you know now and you have two books under your belt, what's next?

MARIE LEE: The next thing is I'm going to be staying in Korea for the entire summer and learning the language. And as for many immigrant kids, it's strange for me being a second generation that I'm only one generation removed from Korea, but that's a country and a culture I know very, very little about. It's very alienating to me.

So I'm not exactly sure what I'd like to do, but I feel at some point that knowing more about my parents' history. And the history of people my parents' generation is such they lived through two wars. The Japanese occupation, immigration. And I think these are really powerful stories that I hope I can somehow preserve. And I feel I have to go to Korea first, so I can have some kind of empathy with what their stories are like.