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# KARTIKA REVIEW

## MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



**MIN JIN LEE**

*For Bob*

When I was five, there was no Pottery Barn for Kids. I was living in Seoul with a busy mom who taught piano 6 days a week, a father who worked as a marketing executive, a popular older sister and a baby sister just out of diapers. Family legend states that I was unbearably shy yet had taught myself to read somehow. My first desk where I drew princesses and practiced my letters was an overturned crate covered with some sort of bright, silky cloth. In 1976, when we moved to the United States, I was 7 and change, and in our one-bedroom furnished apartment, I did my homework on the floor. A few years later, we moved to a two-bedroom apartment upstairs and changed dining tables. The old one that could seat four was propped up against the living room wall, and it became my desk. My sisters did not seem to mind that I got this bonanza while they used two kid’s desks from Seaman’s furniture store resting side by side in the tiny bedroom that we three girls shared.

V. Woolf says rightly that a woman must have her own income and a room to write. As for income, I learned how to earn money as a kid working behind a counter at my dad’s wholesale jewelry shop. Maybe I’ll never make millions, but if push came to shove, I think I could probably earn enough to subsist on what dad called, “tea and bread.” As for a room, I didn’t have my own till my

older sister went to college. This came later when our family got a three-bedroom house. Naturally, I continued to use that dining room table in my first private room. Huzzah. The room was not large; it had just enough floor space for two twin beds (one formerly used by my younger sister who now also got her own room) and my giant desk. The desk surface was covered with neat stacks of work, schoolbooks, an AM/FM clock radio and a café au lait colored IBM Selectric typewriter that Uncle John who worked at IBM got for us with his employee discount. I don't think I loved a desk as much until my younger sister bought me a desk from the catalog company Levenger when I quit lawyering to write fiction. When its legs fell off during a move, I paid over a hundred dollars to have it repaired when the desk itself had cost about two hundred.

Two years ago, at the age of 39, I moved to Tokyo with my husband and son from New York City. The Levenger desk was in no condition to make the long journey so a month before the moving trucks showed up, I went to a modern furniture store and found an inexpensive, painted metal dining table. Under the fluorescent lights, the paint color looked candy apple red, and it seemed like an auspicious, happy color for a move to Asia. I plonked down my money and had it sent to my apartment where it remained boxed up until it was put on a freight container and sent by boat to Japan. When it arrived in our new apartment in Tokyo, I finally opened the box to set up my new home office. The color was hot pink. Not quite Mary Kay, more like Barbie. Hmm. I read the invoice from the store and under color, it read: watermelon. Right. Unpacked boxes towered over me; I was living in a new country where I didn't know how to ask for water or how to read the subway map. No matter. I pushed the pink dining table cum desk against the wall of my office to moor me. I had a desk. I was home.



**Min Jin Lee**, the award-winning author of *Free Food for Millionaires*, attended Yale College and then law school at Georgetown University before working full-time as a lawyer in New York. At Yale, she was awarded both the Henry Wright Prize for Nonfiction and the James Ashmun Veech Prize for Fiction. Ms. Lee has also been the recipient of the NYFA Fellowship for Fiction, the Peden Prize from *The Missouri Review* for Best Story, and the Narrative Prize for New and Emerging Writer. She currently lives in Tokyo with her husband and son where she is working on her second novel *Pachinko*.