Toki Lee's Interview Transcript

Toki Lee: —[How are] you honey?

Tristan Kanitz: I'm good.

TL: How did it sound? Did you test it? Yesterday's recording—

TK: Yes.

TL: That's good.

TK: Yes, I just turned down my voice now so—because I was a little bit loud.

TL: Oh, okay. How's mine?

TK: Good! Okay—

TL: Hi!

TK: Hello! So—

TL: Why are you so cute?

TK: I don't know. [laughter] Okay—

TL: [speaking as Tristan] "Because I'm your son"—okay, focus, all right, sorry.

TK: That's okay!

TL: Can't we do a minute of bantering? Catching up?

TK: Sure. To get comfortable—

TL: Hi—

TK: —I guess. Hi!

TL: What did you have for breakfast?

TK: Oh, eggs. Hard-boiled egg. And potatoes. And tea.

TL: That's nice—

TK: And cantaloupe—

TL: And cottage cheese?

TK: No. I had that for lunch.

TL: [laughter] Oh, you did, good! Yes, what did you have for lunch?

TK: Cottage cheese. [laughter]

TL: That's it?

TK: And snacks and stuff.

TL: You know what's weird? I put cottage cheese on my salad. Along with other toppings, like hard-boiled eggs, sometimes ground beef patty, just trying to up the protein, I know I don't have enough, and I don't think you eat enough either.

TK: Yes, well for lunch I only have 45 minutes. Or—

TL: You got to hurry—

TK: Or like 35 minutes.

TL: Yikes.

TK: So… yes. Okay—

TL: Okay, let's focus.

TK: Are you ready to—

TL: Alright, yes—

TK: —begin?

TL: Yes.

TK: Alright.

TL: I'm ready.

TK: Did you silence your phone?

TL: Oh… no. Alright, it's silenced.

TK: Okay. So… I'm going to ask you some questions, and you can answer them to the best of your ability, and I'll let you do most of the talking, and I won't interfere with your talking. So if there's some pause in between you talking and my questions, that's fine. I'm just making sure the recording can hear everything.

TL: Okay.

TK: Yes, okay, so, first question: can you introduce yourself and tell me how you're feeling going into this interview?

TL: Okay. Hi there, my name is Toki Lee, and I feel great.

TK: Nice, okay. Do you have any goals or things you want to bring up during this interview?

TL: Well, no. I didn't really prepare. I wanted to kind of go in with an open mind, not have any expectations.

TK: Alrighty. So, now I'm going to get into your childhood life. So… just as a starter question, what do you remember about your childhood in Japan?

TL: In Japan? Okay. So, surprisingly I do remember a lot. I know that I had to wear a uniform to go to kindergarten, and I think I went all the way up to first grade, and I still remember having the little skirt, the white blouse, backpack… Kind of walking from home to school by myself. There was just a lot of things I remember, maybe not in vivid detail. If you want stories, I could tell you stories.

TK: Okay. Well… So, [are] there any stories that come to mind that you want to talk about?

TL: Yes, two. So, I think I was maybe about five years old, maybe six, when my mom sent me on a shopping expedition all by myself. And so, I had to walk in a very busy area and cross this super long bridge. I mean, it felt long at the time. Maybe if I go look at it now it'll be a

very small bridge. But I had to walk a long ways to go to this one bread shop and I remember asking for a loaf of bread to the lady behind the counter, whatever, and she said it was a hundred yen or something like that. So I gave her a coin or a bill or something and she kind of was surprised and she was like "No, no, no, this is too much." And so she gave me all this change back. But the weird thing is that I was so little, and my mom did that. But I don't think it's very unusual to do that sort of thing in Japan.

TK: Do you remember where—or which city the bridge was, or where you lived?

TL: Yes. So it was in Tokyo, in… I think it was in a suburb of Tokyo. If I look it up on a map, I can probably find it… yes, I don't remember the exact name right off the bat but I bet you I can find it. But that's one of two stories that I really vividly remember.

TK: Okay, could you tell the next story?

TL: Yes. And actually, there's three stories. The next story was: one time, we were in the bathroom at school and I think I was in the first grade. So we were in the girls' bathroom, and one girl was telling me that she wanted to play with me, go out to the play yard, and play together. And this other girl came and said no, she wanted to play with me. And we were all kind of fighting about who gets to play with me. I don't know why I'd remember this, but my solution—looking back is so silly. But I told them I said, "Well, I mean, I don't know who I want to play with, so you guys have to decide." And so I had them each hold my arm and play tug-of-war. I don't remember the outcome, but I just remember that was my solution, so—it kind of makes me think, even back then, I was pretty diplomatic. I didn't want to say I'd rather play with this person and this person. I wanted them to figure it out. So [laughter], my solution was for them to each take my arm, pull, and whoever pulled harder won—it was so silly. Do you want to hear the—

TK: Did you want to—

TL: —the final one?

TK: Yes, sure—

TL: Okay, the final one. So we lived in this house. And it was a two-story house. And from the second story, there was a balcony. And you can… well, you shouldn't, but you can go onto the roof. Right? So I think I made my little sister get on it. And so she was on the roof. So mind you, if I'm six and seven… now she must have been four or five. So she was sitting on the roof and the neighbor comes running over and she's like, "Get down, get down, get down this moment." And so she was freaking out. And I just thought it was the funniest thing. Nobody got hurt.

TK: That's good. Okay, so what did a typical day look like for you during your childhood in Japan?

TL: Well, so, I mean, probably getting up, having breakfast, going to school, doing homework, and stuff like that. I don't really remember specifics of my day-to-day life. I just remember these moments. Especially when I look at a photo album. It'll kind of spark some more memories for me. Like the fact that I went to a Catholic kindergarten. Oh, yes. And then there was this race or something like a… what do you call it, like a… relay race? And, yes, there's a picture of us at the starting line. [laughter] That's it. That's all I remember. [laughter]

TK: At the Catholic school, were the teachers—

TL: I don't remember what I ate—oh, go ahead—

TK: Oh, what were you going to say? Okay—

TL: Well, I was going to say I don't remember what I ate. I don't remember what time I went to bed or anything like that.

TK: Do you remember if your Catholic teachers were white?

TL: No, they were all nuns. And I don't think they were. I think they were probably Japanese. I could be wrong.

TK: Is that where you learned English or?

TL: No. So I guess we had about a year or year and a half advance notice that we'd be moving to America, specifically California. So at that time, my mom (your grandma) enrolled us in this international school. I think that's where I mostly learned English. So I think I was there maybe a little less than a year. But yes, so I'm pretty sure I learned not just the language, but maybe some of the different customs and ways of doing things at that International School.

TK: Did you say you were more in the countryside than the city?

TL: No. No, no, definitely more city.

TK: Okay. But you said it was in the Tokyo area?

TL: Yes. It's a suburb of Tokyo.

TK: Okay.

TL: You want me to look it up?

TK: No, it's fine. That's okay. So—

TL: Alright.

TK: It was definitely not the countryside, but it was still wasn't in the city.

TL: Yes, definitely. It was very busy where I lived.

TK: Okay. So you said that you don't remember any food you ate, but do you remember any food you ate on special occasions?

TL: Remember what?

TK: Any food that you would eat during special occasions?

TL: Yes, maybe mochi. Always rice. I'm pretty sure we had rice every single day. Yes, no, I don't really remember a lot of food. Not sure why. Maybe I blocked it. [laughter] Because I'm actually allergic to seafood.

TK: Any specific people that you remember? From Japan?

TL: Let's see, outside of my family?

TK: Yes.

TL: I mean, I know I had friends because I see pictures. Black and white pictures, but I don't remember their names or anything. I think I mostly remember my cousins because we were kind of all the same age. So we had a lot of family close by, like uncles and aunts. My Grandma who was very old, and I don't think she spoke any Japanese because she was from Korea. And—oh, it's just funny because my mom was born in Japan, and so she didn't speak any Korean. So she had pretty severe language and cultural differences with her mom. Which is kind of like me and your grandma.

TK: Do remember who your neighbors were, or were they all your cousins?

TL: Oh, yes. So [our] neighbor across the street. I think they had a little tobacco shop. That was very commonplace back then. There was a lot of mom-and-pop shops. And so we lived sort of kitty-corner from them. And yes, so another story. I think I one time I had a bowl—big giant bowl of soapy water. So we were playing outside on the street. That was very commonplace too, you just play outside. And so she had a little girl and I think I poured a whole bowl of water with soap all over her head and so the neighbor… [laugher] started yelling at me. I don't know. Kids, they do things.

TK: Yes.

TL: Oh, sorry. We were very close to this one American family. I don't know if I ever told you about them, but they were the Fleenors… Fleenors [Toki pronounced the o stronger]… F-L-E-E-N-O-R. So the family… they had an older daughter and a younger daughter. Younger daughter was a little bit, maybe just a year younger than me—Laurie. I remember her, she was so sweet. And they were American—they were Christians. And so the dad, I think, was a preacher? a minister? And so your grandma met them somehow. I don't remember how. And so I think she was baptized there. Became a Christian. So we became friendly with them. And they're such an amazing family. They had adopted these two boys: Joe and I don't remember the other boy's name, but one of them was named Joe. And I think they were orphans. And so this family adopted these boys and they were older. So they were teenagers. Anyways, so we spent a lot of time with them, probably the last year or two before we moved from Japan. Yes.

TK: Were the orphans Japanese?

TL: Yes. I don't—they were darker. So I don't know if they were from the countryside, or if they were mixed, but yes, they were… I'm pretty sure they were Japanese.

TK: Okay. So adding on to that, do you remember… all the neighbors in your neighborhood, do you remember the specific race they were?

TL: Yes, they were all a hundred percent Japanese.

TK: Okay. Did you know of any Koreans around or maybe not in your area—

TL: No, I did not. And honestly, I thought my dad was the only Korean person… Yes, so I thought my mom's family… I thought they were all Japanese.

TK: So they never really explained that their family originated from Korea until much later?

TL: Much, much later. I had no idea. So now I know that my parents had to carry around passports all the time when we were in Japan, and they were Korean passports. Even though my mom was born in Japan, she had a Korean citizenship passport. And apparently, I did too, I had no idea. Because she always—growing up—said that she was Japanese. And so I just assumed I was half Japanese, meaning I would explain to people, "Yes, my dad's Korean, my mom's Japanese." And I did not really understand until much later that there's a lot of prejudism [*sic*] against Koreans in Japan. And I don't know how it is now, but I guess when I was growing up it was quite prevalent. And so my mom said that there's no way that I would have ever gotten into a really good college or been able to get a really good job growing up in Japan as a Korean citizen.

TK: Okay. Let's see…

TL: We also have different last name.

TK: Oh, okay, so what was the last name?

TL: So my dad went by *Ajiro* [網代], but his actual name was Lee. So in Japan and I think a lot of Asian countries, they call it the surname, meaning you start your introduction with your family name first. Instead of saying Tristan Kanitz you would say Kanitz Tristan. So his name was *Ajiro*, *Ajiro* [Toki said it in a more American accent], but you know what, this is a really interesting thing. I don't remember what my name was in school. I know what it says on my birth certificate and passport. That's so interesting. My mom's Japanese last name was *Ase*, A-S-E, which is not a very common Japanese name. *Ase* [汗] actually also means sweat. But again, when I was little growing in Japan, I had no clue about any of this stuff. I was just Toki, *Toki-chan*. [*-chan* (ちゃん) is an honorific added to names to express that the

speaker finds the person endearing and if the person being talked to is a young child or baby.]

TK: Okay, so I want to go back to the Korean topic later, but I'm going to go back to your childhood topic.

TL: Okay.

TK: So do you remember any specific teachers from your Catholic school?

TL: I do not.

TK: Okay. Any classmates other than the two that wanted to play with you?

TL: Oh, not really. I don't, it was a long time ago.

TK: Okay, that's okay. Would you say you were content or happy mostly during your time in Japan?

TL: Yes. Very. Also, I think I just figured out which area of Tokyo that I either grew up in or—anyways, I'm not sure exactly where I was born, but I was near Nakano City and Shinjuku City, that's how they call it, which is—I think they're suburbs of Tokyo. [Nakano City and Shinjuku City are special wards of Tokyo.] So Nakano and Shinjuku, near those two areas. [Toki was born in Seibo Hospital in Tokyo and grew up in Shinjuku.]

TK: Do you remember—or do you know how far Osaka is from where you lived?

TL: Osaka?

TK: Or, did you ever—

TL: Isn't Osaka the country?

TK: It's a city in Japan, but were you aware of it when you were in Japan?

TL: No. I mean, I was so little. No, I don't remember. I do remember, however, being hospitalized when I was… four years old?

TK: Could you tell me about that a little more?

TL: Huh? What—

TK: Could you tell me more about that? [laughter]

TL: Oh, [laughter] sorry, I totally spaced out, because I'm looking on the map, so… Yes, so I had tummy issues. And so the doctor thought I needed to have my—I think spleen?—removed. So I believe, yes, so I had my spleen removed. I was four. And I remember being in a shared hospital room with one, two, three, maybe four other kids. And I remember the girl who was next to me, she got some sort of Barbie doll. And so when my parents came to visit me in the hospital, they had brought me a Barbie doll or something like that. So of course, I cannot remember specifics about what it looked like. But I remember the feeling more than anything that they had brought me something wonderful. Just to make me feel better, but yes.

TK: Okay, speaking of the Barbie doll, do you remember your perception of America while you were in Japan? Or?

TL: No. Again, I mean, I was seven, seven and a half when we moved. So I feel like a lot of things, or a lot of my memories are concentrated and focused in one area, and then all of those… anything outside of that, like my thoughts on things like that, what you're asking me, it's very vague. I mean, I do remember moving to America, and all of a sudden, it's like, oh, Dorothy, we're not in Kansas anymore, that feeling. By that point, I think was more like eight, going on nine that things started to hit me.

TK: Okay, so you have no past experience of American culture? It was more just you…

TL: I mean, not so much. I mean, like I said, I had an American friend, Laurie Fleenor. Fleenor [again with a stronger o]. And so she was a brunette. She was definitely American. She was

just the sweetest but, kids being what they are, we always pick on things or people that are different from us. So it's not a real clear memory, but I sort of remember people picking on her sometimes when we would ride the train together, it was a subway, and I probably did that too. I probably also picked on her. Do you know what I mean? Instead of sticking up for her, just because I was so little and I had no idea, I was seven. But yes, if I see any unkindness now towards people who are different, it just makes me so enraged. I can't stand seeing that.

TK: Did the Fleenor family speak Japanese pretty fluently?

TL: Yes. With an accent, but yes, they did.

TK: Okay. Did you say they moved there while you were alive?

TL: Yes, so they were—I think they were missionaries, so they probably moved around a lot. So, it just so happens that during their time in Japan is when we met them. And I believe they were quite instrumental in helping us move to California because I do remember going to a Christian church in Hacienda Heights. That's where we moved to. And so we would go to church and I kind of remember them being there, here and there. So maybe they moved too for a little while, but we definitely lost touch with them over the years, sadly.

TK: So do you remember any memories or feelings you had from Japan that were—that encompassed your sense of smell or hearing or different senses that you wouldn't—sorry, let me rephrase. Do you remember any memories that encompass hearing?

TL: Hearing?

TK: Yes.

TL: Like sounds?

TK: Yes, like any music or—

TL: Oh. Okay, okay. So definitely, where we lived, It was a bustling place. So it was very busy. So you heard cars all the time, things like that. Cars, buses. But when we were out in the countryside, and—so I only remember going out to the countryside a few times, but I distinctly remember the sounds of cicadas. So whenever I hear cicadas, I think about—I think it's called Nakano. [Toki said after the fact that she meant to say Nagano.] It was always really humid. Always hot. The sound of the cicadas reminds me of Japan. Definitely. And as far as music, there's this one song in particular that I remember very well even to this day, but it's not a song that I grew up with. It's when I went back to visit when I was maybe eleven or twelve or something like that. Yes, has something to do with seagulls. I don't know who the artist is but, just kind of remember the song, the sound of it.

TK: Do you have any memories that encompass smell?

TL: Sure, I mean, the city smells dirty. But it's no different from New York or any other big city, it just smells like a city, and especially in the summer, I think it's the asphalt smell. So I lost my sense of smell, maybe going on seven years ago now, seven or eight years. So it's a struggle to remember what things smell like. You know what I mean? Because I'm not reminded every day of what things smell like, it's really diminished a certain aspect of my quality of life. I am grateful that it's not my sight, or hearing, or anything like that. But boy, don't take it for granted, even if you can smell skunk. Because when you can't smell anything at all, the good or the bad, you definitely miss it and notice it. So yes, it's hard to remember honestly, what things smelled like. I mean, it's very distinct.

TK: Any final things about Japan you would like to talk about?

TL: Well, I mean, I definitely—I was just telling Grandma this this morning—that I would love to take my sons there. And I wish I could have taken them when they were little so they can

really enjoy the *Shinkansen* [新幹線], the bullet train, because you guys loved trains and planes and automobiles and trucks and stuff like that when you were little. So I would've really enjoyed seeing you get all giggly and excited to see it and be on it. I mean, I still want to take you, it'll be a different kind of experience, for sure. But yes, so I feel like I had more of an appreciation for Japan when I was able to go back and visit. And the last time I went, I want to say I was thirty years old. So that was a totally different experience, right? Going back as an adult. So I noticed things… wait, I went back when I was like ten, or eleven, or twelve, and then again at eighteen, and then at thirty, all different levels. So appreciating certain things, definitely not liking other things. For example, I did not know that it was frowned upon to eat… on the street. Meaning, let's say you had a hamburger, and there's no place to sit so—one time my sister and I—I think I was eighteen. And we're just standing outside a McDonald's or somewhere like that. Eating. And boy, people are giving us looks. And I don't know if that has changed. Eighteen, I'm fifty-six now. So that's a long time ago. Maybe things have changed in a sense that it's become more Western. But when I was there—and I asked my mom after. I said, "My sister and I were standing there on the street eating," and she's like, "Oh, my gosh, you can't do that. That's so rude." And I thought, *Gosh, how would I know that? I grew up in California, so how would I know that?* Right? Things like being proud that I was able to ask for directions. And then when somebody would turn around and explain how to get somewhere, I would just draw a blank because I had no idea what they were saying. I remember that very well. And I also remember riding in a taxi once, and again, just telling him in my broken Japanese that I wanted to go such and such place. Feeling proud of myself, patting myself on the back. I'm like, "Oh, see, I can still speak Japanese." And then the taxi driver turned around, looked at me, and said,

"You're from California, aren't you?" And he was Japanese. And he said it in Japanese. He's like, "You're from California." And I was blown away that he was able to identify my Japanese accent like that. That's kind of crazy, actually.

TK: I do want to bring up that—

TL: I had a lot of little spurts, you know what I mean? Little tiny things that happen, or little tiny memories of my time in Japan, and my feelings about Japan like the vending machines. Everybody smokes. It's ridiculous how so many people smoke. I mean, again, I don't know if that's still the case or if they become more health-conscious, I'm not sure. I didn't see a lot of obesity in Japan. Probably because everyone walks or they have healthy… diet. Not sure. But you didn't really see any overweight people. I've—oh yes. A lot of people wore masks. Right? And I thought that was so weird. But until we went through COVID and then now it's like, okay, I get it, I understand you're trying to protect other people from catching what you have. And so it's interesting how they really have the mentality of what's good for all, instead of what's good for me. Riding the subways, they're packed in like sardines. And there's no such thing as personal space. Right? Here, somebody stands too close, you're like, "What the—why are you so close? Get back." Over there, it's normal. You just learn to get along. I did sense still… what do you call it? Doesn't—women are… oh, gosh, I hate to say this. Still, maybe to a certain extent, considered second-class citizens over there. I mean, I'm going in with my American mind and my American upbringing, kind of parading around. And then really when you're in Japan, you're a woman, you're [scoffs] kind of not regarded highly, even within my own family in Japan. And I remember distinctly hating that feeling. It angered me.

TK: Thank you for all the info.

TL: You're welcome.

TK: So, okay, now we're going to get to the topic of you first moving to America. So when did you move to the… America?

TL: So we moved right before I turned eight. So maybe I was about seven and a half or seven and three-quarters old. And we moved to America by way of Hawai'i. So we came to Hawai'i first. Not sure how long we were there, maybe a week? two? And then we eventually came to Southern California. So this was nineteen-seventy… four? Wait a second. Se—[whispers] seventy-two, seventy—[out loud] three… yes, I think it was 1974.

TK: Okay. What was your understanding of the reasons for this move?

TL: Well, my mom told us at the time that it was to have better opportunities for us. And again, going back to being Korean citizens in Japan, you had a lot of racism. And so she thought raising us in America would give us, especially with three daughters, better opportunities for success and happiness. But that's what she told us at the time.

TK: So is there anything—or do you understand now, better, the reasons, now that you're an adult?

TK: Yes. And so, [laughter] my dad, oh man, it's so long and complicated. And I don't have all the facts available. But as an overview, basically, he was going to move away or go away, or just something. And he initially wanted to go to Canada. And so my mom decided, or said that, "well, we all need to come with you. It's not like you're going to go by yourself and leave us here." Right? And I don't know his reason for that. I do know that because he—I believe he came from North Korea and emigrated to Japan. There's just a lot of political stuff that I will never understand to this day because your grandpa passed away, what, four years ago? Anyway, so what I understand now is that in order to hold on to her husband, my

mom basically said, “No, we all need to go together. And why don’t we go to California?” Yes. I don’t know. It’s very sketchy. But the end justifies the means, right? We ended up here and every day I’m so grateful that I grew up here and not in Japan.

TK: Do you think your father, being North Korean, made an effect on the family relations?

TL: I’m sure I did. It’s not anything I noticed. I mean, from my understanding, my mom was working at the Korean embassy in Japan. And my dad had—I don’t know if it’s appropriate to say defected or—and so I don’t want to say anything because I really honestly don’t know. Did he come from North Korea? I think so. Did he go to South Korea first or did he come straight to Japan? I do not know. I remember him mentioning one time that he was on a boat or something, and there was a bunch of people and they sell to Japan and so he was rescued. I don’t know if this is true or not so. And I don’t even know if I heard it correctly, right? So yes, so somehow he ended up in Japan. And he saw my mom, realized the kind of family that she was from. And so he pursued her heavily. My mom had no interest in him. But in the end, her family pretty much forced her to marry him. Otherwise, they’re going to just kind of cut her off, because, at that time, she was like, twenty-seven and—twenty-six, twenty-seven—and that was considered old back then. And Grandma was born in 1939. And I was born in 1967. So I think that they got married in… [whispers] sixty-five, sixty-four, [out loud] 1964-ish. Maybe 65.

TK: So was your mother’s family economically well?

TL: Yes. So when my mom’s parents moved to Japan, you have to understand that the whole country was dirt poor. Korea was poor. I think Japan was poor. So, everyone, no one had any means. So I think they started off rolling up tobacco and selling cigarettes. And over time, they became very wealthy. They got into the Pachinko business, eventually real estate,

banking. Let's just say my mom grew up in a really big house, with hired help. And it was one of those homes where generations live together. And everyone's in the family business. Everyone who marries into the family runs the family business. So yes, my uncle was the head honcho over at some bank. I don't know what it was called. Again, I was very young when we moved, I didn't have time to learn all of this stuff, and the only source of information I have is grandma, and you know how grandma is with information. She's not very specific, so you have to really pull it out of her.

TK: So, going back to your move to the US, were there any learning curves or things about the culture that were hard to understand at first?

TL: Oh, sure. I mean, I—really, talk about shell shock. Growing up in Japan, oh, we had a decent size home. But the house that we moved into, it was like a mansion compared to our home in Japan. So it's pretty modest now, looking at it, but it was four-bedroom house and it was—had a huge backyard, a big kitchen, living room, dining room, and all that. And then we lived on a cul de sac and I loved it. So we had a pretty international group of neighbors. We had people of all different backgrounds and there were a bunch of kids so we always played together out on the street. Basically, it's no different from anybody else in my generation. Our parents just basically said, "Go outside and come back when it's dinnertime." Nobody locked our doors. It was much later that the term latchkey kid, which you didn't even know that was, that came to be because a lot of families started this thing where both mom and dad went to work. It used to be just dad would go to work and mom would stay home. But as I got older, a lot of parents started to work. So yes, there was always somebody at home when I was growing up so you could run in and out of anyone's home. So that was kind of different. And, of course, at school, there's people with different

color hair, different color skin, speaking something that I wasn't very familiar with. And I think around this time is when I started not speaking. Do you want me to get into that?

TK: Sure.

TL: So, okay, I had a pretty good life in Japan. I was seven. And I had a good social life. I had friends fighting over me. [laughter] And so when our parents told us—well first they put us into this American school, and we're like, "We're not sure why we're here, but okay." And there was a trek to go there. You have to ride the train and then walk for a while to get to this huge school. Why we're here, I didn't really know. And then that's kind of how it was growing up. They didn't really sit us down and explain things to us. It was just like, "Okay, this is happening." And so I think that explains why I like knowing and planning and just having things in place. I value that very much because it was always kind of a little bit tumultuous after that point where we moved to America. So our parents tell us, "Oh, it's for better opportunity." Okay. And then we come here, we're in a big house, we're in this huge place. I mean, everything was huge. The schools were huge. The shopping stores. Grocery stores are huge. Everything is so huge. The cars are huge. And yes, so I—it's a lot to take in, right? So I'm at the school, and I'm not sure exactly how it started. But I don't know if it's because I was embarrassed to speak. I don't know if it's because I was scared. I don't know if I was prideful. Probably a combination of all three. I started to not speak in class. I spoke outside of the classroom, in the playground I talk, and all that at home, and playing with the kids. But in the classroom, I clammed up. And it became quite problematic. So basically, I started in the second grade. When I went to elementary school, I still remember the name of the school: Kwis Elementary in Hacienda Heights. And I remember the teachers, they were so patient with me, and they knew I was smart, but I would not speak. So they put me

in—they tested me to see if there was anything functionally wrong with me. Then they had me talk to counselors to see if there was something emotionally wrong with me. And it all comes down to—and I'm not proud of this now—but it started off with those three reasons: being afraid, embarrassed, prideful, to where it became a control thing. I had a certain amount of power in my not speaking. I got away with a lot, right? Because everyone knew that I was smart. I had just moved, I was probably traumatized or whatever. So I got away with a lot. And I think I used that to my advantage. Anyway, so that lasted until sixth grade. So second grade all the way into sixth grade, because back then elementary school went to sixth grade. I just did not speak. Surprisingly, I still had friends because like I said, I was speaking outside of the classroom at the playground at recess. So, yes, I just, I actually ended up in the gifted kid class and all that. Yes, anyways, but once I started middle school, and middle school back then was seventh and eighth grade. And so I just kind of in my mind decided I'm just sick and tired of being like this. It's just ridiculous. Just get over it. So I just got over it and just started talking again, it's not a big deal. Because once you do something for a very long time, it's so hard to change your ways. You get stuck. So I think that was my very first lesson in the power and beauty of just letting go. Right? Because I mean, I could have kept doing that. But it served no purpose after a while. I really needed to stop doing that after a couple years, maybe even after a couple months. But, like I said, I was very prideful. And then once you keep doing something for a long time, it's like—oh, man, it's like, when you keep a secret from someone and you want to tell that person because you know that's the right thing to do. But after so much time has passed, you're like, "How do I even tell that person the truth anymore? I messed up, I know I should have told that person."

But ugh, because you don't know how people are going to react, this and that. So I just had to let go. And just… just stop. These are all things you already know about me, right?

TK: Yes. But it's nice to hear again. Let's see. So do you remember anything you found similar or distinct about Japan versus the US?

TL: I think the politeness level in Japan is—it's just ingrained in you to respect your elders. Just be respectful, not get into fights. Right? And so it wasn't necessarily like that in America. [laughter] Everyone's kind of just doing their own thing. It was—so you have to start to kind of switch gears and see the beauty in individuality and speaking your mind and standing up for yourself. But yes, so one time, I think my brother was teased at the playground for being Asian. So I think he got into—okay, so he was being picked on by this white kid. And so my mom put him in karate class. Right? And then so something had happened over time. And so my brother had learned to fight back. So he did. And I think the other family tried to sue us. [laughter] So it was so bizarre. I don't know all of the details, I think it got worked out. But funny enough, my mom, even though she was raised in Japan and had that whole politeness thing going on, she has this feisty side to her. And she doesn't back down. She's kind of like a pitbull. So it really actually suited her to be here in America so that she could just kind of be more herself, although she would have been fine staying in Japan, and she would have just, her whole life spent—spent her whole life just being polite, and just doing her thing, but—and she's still somewhat that way. But she has also learned to kind of talk back and stand her ground and that sort of thing. So I guess that was kind of different, besides the obvious visual things, like the size of things. Everything is spread out. Versus—now had we moved to New York, maybe there wouldn't be as much of a difference, except maybe the diversity. But yes, it's pretty homogenous in Japan. So the

diversity, visually… everything, just the smell the sights, sound. It was all very liberating actually, to see so many different things, different people. Wait, timeout. Can I take a restroom break for a second?

TK: Sure.

TL: Is that allowed?

TK: Yes, yes, of course.

TL: Okay, I'll be right back.

TK: Okay.

TL: I drank a whole bunch of coffee and a whole bunch of water. So I'll be right back.

[pause in interview for bathroom break]

TL: I just thought of something while I was going to the bathroom. Do you want to hear it?

TK: Sure.

TL: So the differences between the American and Japanese culture. Okay, for instance, I had to go to the bathroom, right? I think in Japan, it would've—out of politeness or whatever, they would have just held it until the very end. Whereas here, it's like, if you need something you're going to speak up. There's this term in Japanese called *Gaman* [我慢, patience]. You hear that a lot. *Gaman, gaman, gaman shi nasai* [我慢しなさい, be patient]. So, "just wait," or whatever that means. *Gaman*. Right? You've heard it. And so the Japanese people in general, they would *gaman*. So again, it speaks to what's good for the team, or everyone. *Gaman shi nasai*, okay? Just hold on, wait until the end, whatever. And whereas the Americans with like, "I'm thirsty. If I want a glass of water, I'm going to have a glass of water," or in Japan, even if they're thirsty, they would just say, "no, thank you." Right? That used to bother me so much. [laughter]

TK: Let's see, is there anything about American culture that you embraced fully? Right away?

TL: American culture. As a kid?

TK: Yes. Within the first year or two of being in America?

TL: Yes, I think so. I mean, just again, being able to run around with so much space, and we would just have so much freedom to come and go. Not that I wouldn't have had it in Japan. So you know what I'm saying? I don't know the difference. I might have done the same thing in Japan. In fact, I think I did start to do that in Japan, I would just go off. And I remember getting lost a couple times, because I would just go off on my own. So it's hard to say, is it any different? I mean, maybe if I had moved to America at ten or eleven, I would see the differences a lot more. Because I was seven and eight, yes, not so much. So, I just remember the concept of space. Everything—there's so much room. And the concept of size. Everything is so big, the portions are big. Just everything's so big here.

TK: How did the rest of your family do? During the moving process?

TL: Oh, I mean, fine. I think we pretty much assimilated quite quickly actually.

TK: Of your neighbors, were any of them Asian?

TL: Yes, as a matter of fact, our next-door neighbor. They were Japanese, from Japan. And we had neighbors, two houses down who I think were Chinese. And then another neighbor, Japanese.

TK: And then do you remember any of the races of your other neighbors?

TL: Yes, there were… my mom, your grandma became best friends with our neighbor, who was German from Germany and she's married to a Persian man. And so their kids were half-German, half-Persian, but yes, so—and next to them, they were… well, they were Anglo-Saxon. Gottschalk. That was their last name. So I'm not sure exactly what country

they were from, but they were very, very fair-skinned. And Debbie and I were really close friends. And we stayed in touch for a really long time. And then we also had more white neighbors down the street, more Asian neighbors down the street. There were, I think, just one African-American family. And they were so sweet, the sweetest family ever. To be honest, that was my first introduction to an African-American family. But we didn't call them that back then. The term African American did not exist.

TK: Okay, what did you call them instead?

TL: Honestly, I think we just said Black. Black family. Which sounds so wrong now. Right? Or do people still say that?

TK: I believe now, when you say Black person, it just means that they're of African background, but when you say African American, that they're from America, they have an American background while still being Black.

TL: Okay.

TK: Yes. Okay, so what did you find hardest about the cultural transition?

TL: My parents.

TK: Could you talk more about that?

TL: Well, let's see. My dad had all Korean friends. So they would come over. And at that time, it might be wrong to say so now, but I could not stand them. I hated all things Korean, I hated how loud they were, how obnoxious they were. They pointed. They just made comments. They had no filter. And I just identified more with my Japanese side, they were just more polite and refined. So that's just all in my head, obviously, it's just, I saw my mom and what I remembered about growing up in Japan, everything was so—the details were so nice. And everything was so clean and pretty and sweet. And versus now here's—it's my first time

meeting Korean people, actually, when we moved to America, and they were just so loud. I don't know. It was just, it hit me to my core, how much I did not like that side of me. And it was strictly based on what I saw in my dad's friends, which half the time, they're all drinking and smoking and all that. So maybe that's what I didn't like about it. I have no idea. Oh, and then just especially meeting my friends' American parents, they're just, I thought they were all so cool. And you could talk to them. And I obviously couldn't talk to my mom. She didn't understand half the stuff I was saying. And I remember just having a fit because I wanted to go to a football game. And she was like no because she didn't know what it was. And it just, the whole concept of growing up as an American teenager is so foreign to her. Right? And so I pretty much had to pave the way for my siblings. By the time my baby sister was in high school, of course, my mom was like, "Yes, just whatever, go, no big deal." But for me, it was like there's a lot of fighting because she didn't know anything. She didn't understand anything. To this day, she does not understand a lot about American culture. Doesn't make sense to her.

TK: So in your everyday life, did you have any experience where you had to face anti-Asian racism?

TL: So when I was in high school, one time in a classroom, and we must have been waiting in between, one of those things. It wasn't class time. It was in between. So this one girl got up on top of the table and started chanting something about "Go home" or "Get back on your ship" or "Fresh off the boat" or something like that. And I was like, "What the fuck?" Oh, excuse me. Am I not supposed to cuss? "What the *beep* is she saying?" So bizarre. What a loser. That's kind of the approach I had. So yes, I think that stays in my mind. And she was such a big fat loser anyways. On an everyday basis? Not really. I mean, I'm sure there were

times—one time I was with grandma. We went somewhere. I think it was some kind of beauty convention. And she's the short Asian woman. There's no getting around it. And she went and was asking somebody for directions on how to get somewhere. And the guy—he was some sort of security guy—he just gave her so much shade. And I spoke up on her behalf. Right? And yes, so I remember feeling so angry about that because clearly, he was prejudiced or racist towards her. And I was standing right next to her when he wasn't really doing anything or saying anything to me, but I still felt like it was racism. So I remember telling him off to his face. When I went to Maine, I was worried that I was going to get some looks because I thought Maine was—it's just country, all country, for this place away from California. So when I was, I wanna say I was thirty-four, I went to Maine for a seven-week photography internship. I tell you, they were so kind. Everybody I met, all up and down the state. They were all so kind. They didn't even look at me twice. And back then I was just recovering from my cancer treatment. So I had really short hair. And I was really scrawny. I felt like a skeleton, I felt like a shadow. I wasn't really fooling myself. So I didn't have that confidence about me. I just felt really small. And it was a personal thing I needed to go through and a very vulnerable time in my life. And I had nothing but the best experience from every single person I met in Maine. They were just so beautiful. And yes. Anywhere else, I'm sure I had moments when people did things. Ah, I do remember going out to dinner or something or lunch with someone, a white guy. And I think we were in Solvang or somewhere like that. It's a Danish place, just kind of on the outskirts of that. And we were sitting in a restaurant. And there was this guy sitting not too far away, a middle-aged person. Back then maybe I was about twenty-two or something. Middle-aged guy, and his face was bright red, and he kept casting glances over at us. And then I think this

is—maybe he still had trauma from Vietnam War or something like that. So maybe he was just angry seeing an Asian person with a white guy. I have no idea. Because when we moved to Japan, think about it. That was 1974. Sorry, moved to America. That was, what, right after Vietnam. I do remember a big celebration. 1975. It was a huge centennial celebration? Bicentennial? Anyways, so we had a huge block party. It was red, white, and blue and all the neighbors were out. All the kids were out, parading around and their decorations, decorated bikes. And I remember there was so much pride around being in America, being an American. That's just kind of what I remember more than the other part of it. So…

TK: Did you have any ways or people you can talk to [in order] to cope with the racism?

TL: Like I said, I honestly personally did not experience it that much. I worry more about my mom because she's so Asian, I don't know. But maybe the places that I've lived at has something to do with it. And for example, I grew up, when we were growing up in Hacienda Heights, it was predominantly white. And, to a certain extent, Hispanic. There were not very many Asians around even though on my block, there were quite a few Asian neighbors. I think it was just a new neighborhood, brand-new homes. And so there are lots of people moving in. Now, when I graduated from high school is right around the time that they built a Buddhist temple in town. And after that, there were lots of Chinese people moving in, and buying up properties left and right. But I wasn't around for that. I didn't see any of that. I didn't see the whole place turning into more of an Asian place. So again, I was not around a lot of Asian people. I think in my young adult to now, I didn't live in predominantly Asian places. But as far as who I can talk to. I mean, I guess I could talk to my siblings about it. But again, it's not at the forefront of my mind. To be honest, it's not even in the back of my mind, I didn't really grow up with a lot of that. So good or bad. Maybe I kind of lucked out

with that. Now, mind you, I did go to Japanese language school for about… Shoot, probably for much longer than I remember. But I think I took about three years in high school, two or three years. And I do remember noticing that my last name is Lee. Right? And so that always was different from everybody else who attended. And I would say most of the people who attended the Saturday Japanese school were Japanese. And there was one person, she was half-Japanese half-white. And I wouldn't say people picked on her. But I would say she was singled out a little bit. So to a certain extent, I was probably singled out but I did have friends there, really good friends, that I would see and yes, they were all sweet. They're full Japanese girls.

TK: So did you, during your time in high school and before, did you go anywhere in the rest of the LA area that holds in your memories?

TL: Yes. So I moved to, let's see. Glendale, California for a little while. Okay, this is all in California. Glendale, Montrose, which is a small community near Glendale. I also lived in Pasadena for a short while. I also lived in Burbank. Michelle and I were roommates. And I also lived in Redondo Beach. Where else? Then I moved to Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, Camarillo, now in Oxnard. I don't think I'm missing anything. I actually never lived out of the state. I always wanted to, but I never did. Maybe it's not too late for that.

TK: In those places, did you see a difference in the amount of Asian or other races and like…

TL: And like what?

TK: How those people are treated by the majority white community?

TL: Honestly, I don't recall. I do know that in Glendale, there's a large population of Armenian people. Aside from that, it was pretty even, I think. Just a mix of different races everywhere.

TK: So did you feel like you were the odd one out? Or did you feel like you were connected to other immigrants?

TL: To be honest, when I felt the most odd is when I was in an all-Asian community. And I don't know why. But I think maybe when I'm in those kinds of neighborhoods, I see that there's group mentality, they're all similar, and maybe grew up the same or whatever. And I felt odd because we didn't grow up like that. It was just our family, Mom and Dad, and the four of us kids. And we kids were determined to assimilate as quickly as we can. And I think it was a matter of survival. Right? We didn't want to stick out, we didn't want to be the odd ones out. So we completely embraced American culture. And then that's why I always had… difficult time communicating with my mom. My dad, not so much because he was always working or doing his own thing. And then my parents got divorced when I was nineteen, something like that. So I was already out of the house. I mean, I was so happy to be Ms. Independent, just doing my own thing. So I was always working hard or going to school. So I wasn't at home hardly at all.

TK: So do you have anything else you'd like to talk about about your getting assimilated into America and your early years?

TL: Well, the thing about it is at the time, we didn't know that's what we were doing. Right? And so when people ask me questions now, and then, of course in the last thirty years, when things come up like that, it's interesting because gives you a chance to reflect. So is it a conscious choice I made? Maybe, I have no idea. It is what it is. That's just kind of how I grew up. That's kind of how I survived. Did I put blinders up? Maybe, but I will tell you that I do have more of an appreciation now for my background. I don't know that much about it, to be honest. But maybe it's a journey that you and I can take together to find out more

about my time in Japan and the fact that my grandparents came from South Korea, maybe that's something that we can explore.

TK: Speaking of Korea… so do you remember the exact time you learned you're of Korean ethnicity?

TL: Not really, I think my mom used to say—she'll drop these little comments here and there. And I think maybe a couple times I'm like, "Huh? What? You always told us you're Japanese." Right? And then she'll sort of, kind of overlook that and sort of just say, "No, no, no, I didn't say that," or whatever. So the first time—no, I don't remember. But I remember being an adult and people kind of pointing out the fact that, "Hey, wait a second. If your grandparents were born in Korea, even though your mom was born in Japan, technically, you're probably Korean." So I remember hearing that probably when I was in college, I'll be… yes, I mean, honestly, it's not so clear, but I do remember things like that coming up and just being baffled, like, "Whoa, wait. Wait a second." And then just trying to ask my mom about and she never gave me straight answers. So I never really hundred percent knew. I know you and I have had conversations and I tell you as much as I know, and then I've tried to pinpoint your grandma into telling me exactly. And she's learning how to be more detailed with exactly what she says because I'm kind of trying to hold her more accountable. But I think at this point her being 84, her memory is her memory. She doesn't really remember exact details, either. But we are trying to have more open conversations about things like that.

TK: What do you know about your family history before your parents' generation?

TL: The only thing I know is that my mom has told me that our generation, our family goes back twenty-eight generations at this point. I believe that I'm the twenty-seventh generation. And

you're the twenty-eighth generation. [correction: Toki is the twenty-eighth generation and Tristan is the twenty-ninth.] This is on my mom's side. She has explained that our family… there's Chinese ancestry, Indian ancestry, she even indicated that there's some sort of royalty in India, at some point in the past, so I'm not sure exactly how and where. Meaning I don't know if it started in India and moved to China, or started in China and moved to India, to Korea to Japan, I don't know how that all works. But that is what I've been told. And if you can find out more about that, I would encourage you to do some digging into that. I know there's some books that exists, but it's all in Japanese, and Grandma can't find her copy. So I should try and find one for her. Because you can trace it back. And as a matter of fact, at some point, if you get a chance, you should try and interview Grandma, it doesn't have to be a super long one. Maybe just do, I don't know, five-minute interviews or something like that. Just keep a record because it'll be amazing to have that recording where she's telling you with her words. I'm telling you with my words, and maybe I'm not saying it exactly how she remembers it. Right? Because she was an adult when I was seven. I don't remember my seven-year-old mind. I thought things a certain way. I'll remember stupid things. For example, my sister Tomi, we were fighting one time and she bit into my arm. I remember that vividly. But I don't know if that really happened. Do you know what I mean? My mom might say, "No, it wasn't exactly like that." I remember her biting down, clamping down. And also remember I stuck a marble in my sister's ear and then my mom had to rush my sister to the hospital because it got stuck. I remember doing some bratty things, but I probably did more. [laughter] I was a rebel before I even knew I was a rebel. But I think my trauma was at—even though I did these rebellious things, and maybe I felt odd like that, not so much because of my race. But then I had this other side of me where I was intensely shy.

Horrendously petrified, speaking to anyone. And then of course, when we moved to America, and everybody looks different, and I don't even know why we're here. I do, but I don't. And so again, I can be academic and tell you, "Oh, here are the reasons why I didn't speak when I was in the second grade when we moved to America." But if I'm going to be really honest and look at this little kid, and she's right here in front of me, I could see she was so scared. She didn't know what was going on, her world was spinning. And she felt so alone and vulnerable. And it's just like, "Okay, is this a visit? Or are we here to stay?" There were no words of—my mom was not exactly Lovey Dovey, or encouraging at all. And she was mostly—she had four kids that she needed to raise, she was stressed out because maybe her marriage was not all that and just—and she was a rebellious one as well. She was the youngest of nine kids. [correction: she was the youngest of eight kids.] And she wanted to do things and she couldn't. And she was forced to get married. So there's a lot of overlaying things, right? It's never that simple. It's never a black-and-white answer. Why did you do what you did? Or why are you the way you are? There's so many things. There's layers. And it takes time to uncover it all. But you see me now and I'm pretty chill, I think. No? Yes? I'm pretty extroverted. I'm pretty confident, I can talk to anybody. I—but my seven, eight-year-old me—you're just, you're still a little kid. You don't know anything. And so I think I was very defiant. And like I said, I was so defiant. I didn't want to do what people were telling me to do, include talk in class. I was like, "You know what? Mm-mm." And I got so much power, a dumb power trip from that. And but at the end of the day, I think it all comes from fear.

TK: Okay, so—

TL: What's your thought on that?

TK: My thought? I agree with it all comes down to fear. I think you explained it pretty well, that we all kind of do things we wouldn't naturally do because fear. That we're scared of the unknown.

TL: Yes, it's so true. I mean, why are we all so scared of the unknown? I mean, you kind of have to go through it to know, and then you're not scared anymore. I don't know. But yes, so I'm really coming to terms with my mom. Now we say it's a language barrier. It's a generational thing. It's a lot of things. But—and I wonder if I was born in Jap—or sorry, if I was raised in Japan, we never moved to America? What kind of relationship would I have with myself and my parents? And it'd be, gosh, out of the swirl, different, night and day? Do I feel lost as a person? Because I don't know my—is it ethnic background? My ethnicity? I have very little knowledge. I wouldn't say I'm lost. But again, it's really not at the forefront of my mind. I think having cancer at a young age… I mean, that was a very humbling event, a life-changing event. For sure. I don't think I still processed all of that. And that was what, twenty years ago, something like that? twenty-one years ago now.

TK: Would you like to go deeper into that?

TL: Sure. I was thirty-four when I found a couple lumps in my left breast. And I decided to go get the lumps checked out. And it was, again, it's not so black-and-white. It was a kind of a drawn-out process. Meaning I was inclined to ignore it, right? Because I was young and healthy. I had a great life, working hard, playing hard. Had a great social life. I was working out, good health. But I was out partying a lot. Right? So I wanted to ignore it, but I didn't want to, I had friends who told me I shouldn't ignore it. Go check it out. Then I had a really uncomfortable actually probably illegal experience where a doctor—tell me if this is too much information. But a male doctor made some inappropriate comments. And there was no

nurse in the room. And I left that room shaky. I was like, “What just happened? I don’t want to go back. I don’t—I want to ignore this.” So my sister was a doctor at the time and she said I need to report him blah, blah, blah, and I said, “No, I don’t need to do that.” So I just didn’t ever go back to him. So I didn’t want to go to another doctor but found another doctor, it was a male doctor, he had a nurse in the room at the same time, so I felt a little bit better. And he said, “Yes, you have two lumps, we can do a biopsy, check it out a lot of women—” this is exactly what he said, “—a lot of women would basically choose not to get a biopsy.” And I said, “Can I ask you why?” He said, “Oh, they don’t want a scar on their breasts.” And I said, “You know what, I don’t really give a damn about a scar on my breasts. Can you just take out these lumps, look at it, and tell me it’s okay? Just give me some answers.” So we scheduled a biopsy. And this is after we already had ultrasounds and all the other pre-stuff. And so we scheduled this and he came out of the surgery room to tell my mom and friends who were there in the waiting room, that everything was good, and it was all clear. So a few days later, it’s Easter Sunday, and we were at a huge Easter brunch at Michelle’s dad’s place. So there must have been a hundred people there or something like that. Everyone’s like, “Congratulations. It’s so good, blah, blah, blah.” And I remember having this really bad feeling like I had this doomsday feeling like a black cloud over my head. And then halfway into the party, I started hyperventilating. And I could not stop. And I’m like, “Oh, fudge, what is going on? Just stop, knock it off.” Because you want to be in control of your body and your life. Right? But something was wrong. And I was—looking back now I know what it was. But at the time I started hyperventilating, shaking, and then everybody started freaking out. They wanted to call 911. “No, no, no, no, it’s okay. It’s okay.” Took a while but I finally calmed down, went home. And next day, I remember it was

Monday because I stayed home from work. And I was at home by myself. My doctor calls me to tell me on the phone, "I'm sorry, Toki, you have cancer." And it's a literal, literal slow motion where I screamed, I dropped the phone and it felt like I was watching a movie watching myself being told I had cancer. Nowadays they don't do that. They call you in first, make sure somebody's with you before they tell you. But I remember just—yes, so now I know looking back, it's like somehow, I knew, consciously, subconsciously my body knew. I don't know. I knew that it wasn't okay. So that's how I got the news about my breast cancer. And it was, yes, quite the journey from that point on to when I had my final surgery. Overall, maybe a little less than a year, but it was a whirlwind. I would not wish cancer upon any of my friends or let alone enemies if I had any. I wouldn't want them to go through it. It was so… [away from mic] so awful.

TK: So…

TL: It's a lot. I feel like I'm giving you just enough information. We can always dive in deeper of course, but I'm trying to kind of let you lead the direction in where you want this to go.

TK: Okay. Okay, so, well, I just want to go back to your identity. So after the little bubbles of information about your ethnicity, would you today consider yourself Korean or Japanese?

TL: Well, I would say that—this is how I would explain it. I would say, "My father was born in Korea. My mom was born in Japan. However, her parents were born in Korea. So that makes me Korean. However, I was born in Japan." So yes. Just kind of linger like that. It's not very definitive. It depends on—for example, Grandma brought up a good point today. She said, "Yes, but your kids are American. Because they were born here." I'm like, okay, let's think about this. You are half-Asian, whatever that Asian part is, and half-Caucasian. That Caucasian side has twenty-five percent—because your nana, both her parents were

Irish, so she's hundred percent Irish, which makes you twenty-five percent Irish. And then the other fifty percent, your dad's dad was a mix of things. Oh, wait a second. Are you twenty-five percent Irish or one-eighth?

TK: I'm not sure—

TL: Because your dad… your dad is half-Irish. So you're twenty-five percent Irish.

TK: Okay.

TL: So how do you explain that? You just say you're half white, half Asian, right?

TK: Yes. Well, which would you say—or I know before you said, you thought your father's Korean friends were quite annoying. So would you say that you definitely appreciate Japanese culture more than Korean culture?

TL: At the time, I appreciated the Japanese culture more because that's where I grew up for seven years. But now I'm learning to embrace Korea, Korean—you know what, I give a lot of credit to BTS. No. Freaking. Joke. They're the ones that made me open my mind and my heart to Korea. Is that silly?

TK: No.

TL: It's true, though.

TK: Yes. I think that's where a lot of people today have opened up to Korean culture as well. About that, on that topic. So what are your thoughts on Asian culture and entertainment today?

TL: So they're mostly very Western in style. I think they copy a lot of the Western music, like the hip-hop and rock and stuff like that. Which is not a bad thing. It's kind of like the Japanese people, they're known for their cars and things like that, right? Toyota and Nissan and all that. But when you trace the history back, they basically took the American car

engine and made it better. Right? So maybe that's kind of how I see the Korean pop culture. I'm not saying it's better. I didn't say that. I don't mean it as far as that goes, because it's still an interesting genre. I don't always love it. K-pop, but I'm more open to it. And I don't know anything about their actual—you know what I love about BTS is that they have a lot of pride in their country. And I think that really helped seeing Korea in a different light, because they have so much love and respect. And that's the thing, they respect their elders, they place a lot of importance and emphasis on respecting your elders depending on age. And it's a known rule, I guess. Everybody knows that. So they all kind of follow it, nobody gets out of line. There's something to be said for that. There's a sense of beauty and appreciation in that. Whereas here, I worry about Grandma, because some thug can come down the street and just because they can, they'll knock her over because she—and I fight about this all the time—she's like, "I can take the bus, I can do it. I can do it." And I said, "I know you can do it physically. That's not what I'm concerned about. I'm just worried about the external factors, outside people coming, and to just harm you just because they can or they're in a really bad place and they're desperate. And so they're going to take your purse or—or it's racism, they hate all Asian people so they're going to knock you down." I don't worry about me. I worry more for her. I don't worry about you guys. You know how to stand up for yourselves. Also, you don't look a hundred percent Asian. I'm sorry, I went on a tangent. What was your question?

TK: Yes, well, you answered it, it was, "What are your thoughts on Asian entertainment and culture?"

TL: You should ask me my thoughts on Asian men.

TK: Okay, what are your thoughts on Asian men?

TL: So for the longest time, for all of my life, I've never dated an Asian man. And when I was younger, it was because I just felt like—they look like my brother. And I was not attracted to Asian men at all. I'm learning to appreciate Asian men more, especially the ones that look more masculine. Because some of them don't look very masculine. I mean, sorry if that's a… incorrect thing to say.

TK: So…

TL: [laughter]

TK: You experience, or… wait, let me think about this. So when you first came to America, did you have any experience where you saw Asian culture or entertainment? And—or what were your thoughts on Asian culture in America—

TL: I hated all things Asian growing up, I think I was racist towards my own ethnicity. And I'm not proud of it. But that's the way it was. I mean, I have to be honest, I didn't—I despised it. I hated being Asian. I wanted to have blond hair, blue eyes. I think that's why I gravitated towards guys who look different from me. When I was younger. Now I've long since gotten past that, I have full appreciation for all things Asian and my culture and I'm proud of it and all that. But I know growing up, I was anti-Asian myself. I mean, maybe it's no coincidence that I also love Siamese cats. They have blue eyes and lighter color fur, I don't know.

TK: What are some examples of non-Asian culture that you embraced that would not be seen in Asian culture?

TL: Oh, the Italians.

TK: Like Italian men?

TL: Yes. I was—

TK: Or wait—

TL: My first husband was half-German, half-Italian.

TK: Do you want to talk more about that?

TL: Well, I mean, there's the sense of romanticism, like romance with the food and the language and the beautiful architecture and just their music and food, wine. Things like that. It's a complete opposite of Asia, isn't it?

TK: Did you have any musical preferences in your early years?

TL: I was all about pop, pop culture. I would listen to that radio. But back then we didn't have CD players or definitely not streaming. So it was all record player or the radio, so you'd have to wait for your favorite song to come on the radio, get your little tape recorder and then record the song. [laughter] I'm trying to remember the earliest songs, the records that we had. First of all, I had a Winnie the Player, Winnie the Pooh record player. And I'm thinking—we had something called, oh gosh, Kristy McNichol, or someone like that, teen bebop singers. I don't think we had Captain Tennille but somewhere along that line—Shaun Cassidy, that's right. I think Leif Garrett, Shaun Cassidy… Wow, I'm really dating myself! I barely remember them. And then as I got a little bit older, in my high school years, I loved Duran Duran, huge Duran Duran fan. Depeche Mode, Spandau Ballet. I got into new wave, British rock, music like that. And no, I did not listen to any Asian music at all. My Dad did, he played records all the time, I'm like, "Okay."

TK: Do you feel that you can relate to or have nostalgia for parts of Asian culture?

TL: Probably, if you take me back to Japan, then it will probably overwhelm me. But right now, just eating the food or just going to Little Tokyo, it still feels too American. So I think the only way to really fully appreciate it all over again, is to go back there where I was born.

TK: Okay, so now I'm going to talk more general, on current events. So what do you think of the North Korean-South Korean conflict? And has it affected you if at all?

TL: Well, I think it's terrible. I hate to see it. But no, it has not affected me at all. My life is here, so… mm-mm.

TK: Okay, so you would say that you haven't really given it a thought?

TL: Well, I mean, I can't say I haven't thought about it. I think… I don't know how it came to be. I think I would never want to go to South Korea because it's too close to North Korea. I think people in South Korea must live in fear every day knowing that their next-door neighbor can strike at any time. But, to be honest, they can strike us too. So I don't know that much about it. But I definitely hear about it on the news enough to give it thought and, son of a gun, how does somebody like that [laughter] come into power? It's, it's really kind of scary. And also, I wonder how long can it go on?

TK: Yes. Do you have anything else you'd like to talk about? About anything about your life?

TL: Specifically related to my upbringing? Culture?

TK: You can talk about that or anything that relates to you somehow.

TL: Well, I mean, not really, I do feel like other people have a deeper interest and appreciation for the Asian culture than I do, which sometimes I'm like, huh, why do I have such a lack of interest? I don't know. Like I said, if you take me back to an Asian country, maybe it'll all come back, and I'll have more appreciation, and I'll want to explore but I don't know, I kind of tend to live in the present, like thinking about today and tomorrow, planning for the future and just thinking about the trips I want to take in the future. And so I don't really dwell on the past too much. I mean, I think it's important. Definitely, I think I'm the way I am today, because of my past. I think I have more empathy and appreciation for different cultures and

diversity and all that because of my past. But as far as me, you know what, I'm fifty-six, it's not like I can turn back the time and become more Japanese or more Asian or more South Korean. I basically grew up American. Right? So I'm in no man's land.

TK: Do you have any final comments?

TL: Oh, Are we almost done? Are we done?

TK: Yes. Well—

TL: Oh.

TK: Unless you want to talk about something else, but then we would be done.

TL: No, we can move on.

TK: Okay, well, that was all the questions I had. If you want to say anything else, then go ahead. But then other than that, the interview is concluded.

TL: Well, did I answer all of your questions?

TK: Yes.

TL: I'd be curious to know—we don't need to go into it right now. But it's been all one-sided. I would be curious to know your thoughts before the interview, and then now after the interview? I mean, I don't think I've told you anything new or different. Things I've told you growing up, I try to share as much as I can. Do you have any questions for me personally?

TK: Well, I felt like this interview revealed a lot that I didn't know about.

TL: Oh, good.

TK: Yes. Because, maybe because I was listening more—

TL: What parts?

TK: Oh what?

TL: What parts?

TK: Just very small things like your memories of Japan, or… yes, stuff like that.

TL: So, one of my favorite movies is *Spirited Away*. So I think even though I don't understand all about it, just number one, the fact that we watched it together when you were a kid, and seeing how much you guys loved it made me love it even more. And me not really understand any of those Japanese ways. In all the animes I have no idea what's going on or what they're talking about. But it brings back nostalgia, I guess, like our trips to the countryside in Japan. I think I saw all those places, and the sights and all that. And so it'd be really cool to do more of that, here on out, try to find little ways to incorporate my ethnicity by going to little Tokyo and stuff but still feel like an outsider, like a tourist, when I go to a Little Tokyo if that makes any sense. And my brother has called me this name. And I know you guys have teased me about it, too. What is it, banana? Yellow on the outside, white on the inside? Which people think it's kind of rude, but I don't think it's rude. I think it's pretty relevant and true. I think it's funny. Surprisingly, I think my youngest sister who spent the least amount of time in Japan is a lemon, she's yellow on the outside and yellow on the inside. She's definitely more Asian than I am, which is so weird. But she also didn't have that need to assimilate. So where I must have put up a block, just block all things Asian. Right? So—and I know that, and I have no feelings about it one way or the other. It's kind of how I grew up, and it's where I am today. But I have no negative feelings. And in fact, I probably have more appreciation, I guess. It's true. But then it's weird because I wasn't brought up to kneel down and bow. So that's kind of weird to see that. Like the amount of respect people give each other, I think it's cool. In Japan and Korea, how they're always bowing to each other, right? As a sign of respect. And here, if you do that, that means you

gave up or you gave in, you're not at the top. So it's interesting trying to balance out all that. I'm at a point now where I don't feel at a conflict. Because I think when I was in my twenties and thirties, I had a lot of conflict about my identity, who I am, where I came from, where I want to go, and then cancer hit and knocked everything unimportant out the door. Now it's just the core thing is what's really most important. I really give a lot of credit to cancer for kind of speeding me through the process, because I think a lot of people wake up, one day they're fifty, they go through something called midlife crisis, right? Between forty-five and fifty-five. Maybe actually nowadays, it's people go through it starting forty, they have midlife crisis at forty. They're like, "Why am I here? Who am I?" and they start doing all kinds of weird stuff, they either revert, go backwards to their twenties, and whatever, start doing all that again, or maybe they go the other way. But I think I got a jumpstart on that because I was knocked off my high horse. It's almost like, literally, God took a bat and knocked me off my high horse and said, "You know what, get your shit together, because you got two angels up in heaven waiting for you to be their mom." And I know this without a doubt. And that's the most important thing to me in my whole entire life. And that's what drives me. Right? It's not about where I was born. It's not about any of that. I mean, that's all secondary, as far as I'm concerned. Number one is I survived cancer. And I'm so grateful for that. Every day, I'm so grateful, because I only had a small window of opportunity to conceive, meaning I had cancer, I could not, there was no way. Then I had inability to become pregnant. And so for a very short duration—and so for that reason, I'm grateful that your dad came along. Right? When he did, otherwise, you and your brother would not be here. And it's just the biggest blessing. And I'm not saying it just because we're on this interview and stuff. But truly, I understand that the race thing to me, ethnicity,

it's not that important to me. And I don't feel bad about it. Because sometimes I did feel bad because I had so much conflict growing up, like, "Who am I? Do I care? Do I not want to be Asian? Do I want to hide from that?" And then to now where I am, it's like, embrace it is what it is. But it's not the most important thing. I don't know why people place so much emphasis on it, to be honest. The world we live in today, the countries, the divided lines, what's going on in the current affairs, oh my gosh, I just don't understand why there's so much importance placed upon where you were born. Right? And I know it is important to people, I get that. But for me, I think it's more important who you are as a person, not where you were born. All these divided lines. I predict that in the next fifty to a hundred years. Maybe a hundred to three hundred years, it's not going to matter. It's not going to matter what country you were born in, where you live, it's not going to matter. It's all the same. All right. That's it. I got off my soapbox.

TK: I actually came up with one more question.

TL: Okay.

TK: Where's the place you'd most like to visit? Which country—

TL: Oh my gosh, Tristan, I have a long list of places I want to visit. And so… Do I have to be specific? Or can I just say the region?

TK: Or you can list off multiple places.

TL: Oh, my goodness. Okay, number one, you know at the top of my list is Italy. Within Italy, I want to visit every single inch of that entire country. But from there, I want to visit the entire, entire region. So Central Europe, the Northern Europe, England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Spain, Portugal. I mean, where do I not want to go? Right? I want to go to Iceland. I also want to visit every single state in the United States of America. Certain

countries, eh, take it or leave it. I don't need to go, I'm good. We'll focus on Europe. Oh, and go back to Japan of course.

TK: Would you say your desire for visiting Europe was a little bit influenced by your growing up in America?

TL: Oh yes, yes, yes. Yes, definitely. I think so.

TK: Okay. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

TL: I wish you would learn a little more Japanese.

TK: Me? Or—

TL: Yes.

TK: Oh, I guess. I'll do that after Italian. [laughter]

TL: Okay. [laughter]

TK: Yes.

TL: That sounds good. I think it'll be interesting to find that international school I went to because, to be honest, it's very vague in my memory, and so what I see in my mind, in my memory, the little pockets of memory that I have, I'd love to see it all come to fruition as an actual place and actual moment in time because you know what I mean? You're still young so your memory is probably more solid. Whereas, you get to be my age and the memories you have, you think, "Oh, I'm never going to forget that!" or "I'm never going to forget every little detail of my very first—" everything, whatever, but you do. You forget. That's why it's so important to document everything, either in writing, doing little videos, it's really important. And you're not going to remember. I don't even remember, I don't know when you took your first step. [laughter] I have to kind of check back. Anything else

Tristan? Oh, let me ask you this, let me turn the tables on you. How do you identify ethnic-wise? Ethnicity-wide? Wise?

TK: Well, I'd say, same with you, I'd culturally identify more with Japanese, but I guess in terms of actual facts, I guess I'm Korean, but I would want to learn a little more about Japanese culture than—I'd want to learn more about that than Korean culture as of now.

TL: I will say when we watch movies like *Karate Kid* and things like that, then I look for little things to pull me in so that I can feel my identity more and, I mean, I will say it doesn't a hundred percent, I have pride, because I'm like, "I was born in Japan! I grew up in Tokyo!" But yes, it's definitely not a hundred percent there. But, so how come you don't identify with your Irish side? Maybe the German side? Because you were learning German and you seemed very into learning more about the German culture and all that. I feel like that kind of dropped off a little bit.

TK: Well, I just never really thought about my Irish or German ethnicity, probably because, I mean, on my dad's side, it's just white and not really any specific country.

TL: I think when you do your study abroad, you'll be in a unique position to be able to go and travel to all these European countries because they're all right next door to each other, and I think it's going to give you a lot to kind of think about and ponder on, so that's really cool. So I think it's great that you're doing this now right before you get out there. It's a great exercise. Thank you for asking me to interview with you. I'm so honored.

TK: Okay, well, I don't have anything and if you don't have anything, I guess we can conclude the interview.

TL: Okie doke! Thank you so much! I love you! Good luck! [laughter]

TK: [laughter] Thanks. Okay—

TL: So don’t forget. Try to interview Grandma at some point.

TK: Okay.

TL: Just ask her one question at a time.

TK: Yes. Okay, I’ll stop the recording.

TL: Okay, stop the recording. Don’t hang up.

TK: Okay.

[end of recording]