

KINFOLK



CHANGE

Small steps, big dreams: Learn to leap into your own unknown

GRETA LEE

On writing the roles she couldn't find

FEATURES

Productivity, power moves and painted fashion

INTERVIEWS

Lindsay Peoples Wagner, Ai-Da, Lana Turner



Greta Lee built her reputation playing charismatic outsiders in other people's stories. Now, she's writing her own.
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Left: Lee wears a jumpsuit and mules by Christian Wijnants. Chair: LC4 by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand from Cassina. Previous spread: Lee wears a dress by Christian Wijnants. All earrings by A.P.C.

Greta Lee did not want us to end up at Dimes. The tiny, cliquish café on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, with its pastel cafeteria tables and oversized palm fronds and pillowy tahini toasts, is such a scene, after all. It's the kind of place where you can find runway models and Swedish tourists alike sitting on the blond wood bar stools all day long, sipping orange blossom kefir and eating macrobiotic power bowls. It's not that Lee objects to any of this, really, it's just that she wanted to take me somewhere a little more *New York*.

Her first idea was to meet for breakfast at the nearby Golden Diner, a new greasy spoon that prides itself on being old school: The chef, Samuel Yoo, set out to replicate the classic Queens diners of his youth, chrome swivel stools and all. Lee worked with Yoo, once upon a time in the aughts, when she was a server at Momofuku Ko, David Chang's Michelin-starred restaurant where it is still impossible to get a reservation. She thought it might be poetic, to nod at how far they'd come since: Yoo with his own establishment, she the co-star of Netflix's *Russian Doll* who is also writing and producing her own comedy show for HBO.

But things do not go to plan. When I arrive at the diner on a chilly morning in late October, Lee is waiting outside, slumped against the locked front door with her arms crossed and a bemused look on her face. She is wearing high-waisted linen pants topped with an oversized ivory cardigan that ties together in the front with red ribbons (the sweater is from YanYan, a new independent label founded by the designers Phyllis Chan and Suzzie Chung out of a desire to update traditional Chinese clothing; Lee found them on Instagram). The outfit—along with her short black bob—makes her look simultaneously five and 95 years old. She later tells me that this is the exact aesthetic she is going for. Her style icons are babies and “old New Yorkers eating ice cream in the parks. If you see an octogenarian eating ice cream, chances are their outfit is what I want.”

The diner, as it turned out, was closed on Mondays. “Oh well,” Lee says, with sigh, “Dimes it is.” After we sit down and order our green juices and Love Toast, she tells me that if she'd been hesitant to eat here, it was because it feels “very Los Angeles.” Lee, who is 36, spent

most of her youth in LA, but she moved away after high school and never wanted to return. When she was a teenager, growing up in La Cañada Flintridge, a tiny neighborhood wedged between Glendale and South Pasadena, she would drive up to the dusty parking lot of a local country club and look out over the city lights. While some might have found this view romantic, Lee felt disenchanted by what she saw. "I was really having that *Little Mermaid* moment," she says. "I wanted to get out there, far away. I think I was just one of those kids who, from a young age, really wanted to be in New York."

Lee did live in New York City as a small child, but she was too young to really remember it. Her parents, who met in Seoul, moved first to Los Angeles, where Lee was born in the early 1980s, but they quickly ended up bouncing around the country. Her father, a doctor, "couldn't find a hospital that would hire him because he didn't speak English," Lee says. The family moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, then Canarsie, Brooklyn (Lee has two younger siblings, one born in each city), and then eventually back to Los Angeles,

where they settled long-term. Telling me this story, Lee brings up the concept of sacrifices. Her mother, who was an accomplished classical pianist in South Korea, "moved here, and stopped," Lee says. "And she basically just took care of us until we left for college."

Because her mother abandoned her own artistic ambitions, Lee, who grew up singing and dancing, felt doubly driven to pursue a life as a performer. She studied musical theater at Northwestern University in Chicago (where she met her husband, the actor and writer Russ Armstrong) and then immediately moved to New York City, hoping to start her life as a professional actress.

Right away, Lee landed a role on *Law & Order: SVU* in an episode called "Taboo," in which she played the roommate of a girl embroiled in an incest scandal. Shortly after that, she was cast in the national touring production of the comic musical *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* as Marcy Park, a stressed-out, overachieving star student who only sleeps three hours a night. Lee opened the show in San Francisco, then Boston, and then moved back to

New York, where she stepped into the role on Broadway. By the time she was 25, Lee had performed thousands of times, to crowds all over the country. She thought she had it made.

"I thought I was going to become the Korean Natalie Portman of my generation," she says, with a laugh. "I was like, 'I've made it. Goodbye everyone!' I had no idea that after that show ended, it was like oh, now you go wait tables for many, many, years."

During her whirlwind of theatrical success, Lee would regularly buy drinks for all her friends with her measly Broadway salary ("Some of them were bankers. What the fuck was I thinking?") and racked up more credit card debt than she'd like to admit trying to emulate the extravagant New York fantasy she had in her head when she was a child. "I was an asshole trying to be Carrie Bradshaw," she jokes. "I got here and just threw away money... I think I would have a house if it weren't for *Sex and the City*."

When *Spelling Bee* closed in 2008, Lee found herself suddenly out of work and unable to find it again. The role of Marcy—a meaty,

"I waited tables on a lot of people I've worked with since."



Left: Lee wears a dress by Moon Choi and mules by Christian Wijnants. Chair: LC8 by Charlotte Perriand from Cassina. Right: Lee wears a dress by COS and boots by Christian Wijnants. Chair: LC9 by Charlotte Perriand from Cassina. All earrings by A.P.C.



Set Design: Javier Irigoyen, Hair: Eloise Cheung, Makeup: Rommy Najor.



Left: Lee wears a top and shorts by Equipment and mules by Christian Wijnants. Chair: Hemlock Console by Orior. Right: Lee wears a knitted top by Christian Wijnants. Table: Hemlock Console by Orior. All earrings by A.P.C.

scenery-chewing part for an Asian woman—turned out to be more of an exception than the rule. Lee started hostessing at the buzzy Momofuku Ssäm Bar, and then graduated to “senior server,” helping to open other David Chang restaurants, including Ko and Má Pêche. She was determined to keep auditioning, but she also became more and more entrenched in the food world. “It’s hard for me to do something casually. I definitely got sucked in,” she says. “I waited tables on a lot of people I’ve worked with since, and it’s a kind of a private joke that I have. Because they don’t remember, but I’m like, *I have served you pork buns, sir.*”

In 2012, Lee took a small part in *4000 Miles*, a Pulitzer finalist play by Amy Herzog that premiered at Lincoln Center. She almost said no, because her character was only in one scene. She played Amanda, a Chinese woman who is dating the lead actor, who has returned to New York City to visit his surly grandmother. Her presence is meant to provoke the old woman, to serve as a visual shock. “It’s this big, explosive moment, storywise,” Lee says, “But that’s actually one of my gripes about contemporary American theater. I felt like the parts for minorities, in this world of, like, *prestige* family drama plays... If I’m gonna be in it, I’m going to be, like, fucking the son. It’s like the outsider can only be invited in in a very specific way.”

Her one scene did make a big impression—namely on a young Lena Dunham. After seeing Lee in the play, Dunham wrote her into *Girls* as the snotty gallerina, Soojin. Then, at a table read for *Girls*, Lee reconnected with the comedian Amy Schumer, who she’d first met in an elevator after an audition. Schumer cast Lee in her Comedy Central show *Inside Amy Schumer* (you may remember seeing Lee in that viral

“Compliments” sketch, in which a group of women put themselves down to the point of violent absurdity). Around the same time, Lee appeared in a web episode of the show *High Maintenance*, which has since transferred to HBO, as “Homeless Heidi,” a woman who squats in a Tinder flame’s apartment because she doesn’t have a place to live. In 2014, Lee played a similar role on *New Girl* as Jake Johnson’s love interest Kai, who he thinks is also a grifter until she reveals she is secretly an heiress.

While Lee suddenly started to land parts—and thanks to her droll, deadpan affect stood out whenever she was on screen—the fact that her success was mediated through a series of white women creators began to grind away at her. “Even with my closest peers, I will have a moment of realizing, ‘Oh. You still see the world that way,’” she says, taking a bite of scrambled eggs. “Like I can only be part of this story as a complete outsider. Basically the racism is so systemic, and we’re not close to fixing that.”

One day, when Lee was griping to Schumer about the lack of hefty material for Asian women, Schumer told her that the only solution was for Lee to write it herself. “She was sort of like, ‘Okay dummy, so just open up your laptop and go tap-tap-tap and and write it,’” Lee says. “Which is also very funny, ‘cause it’s not, obviously, that easy.” Lee sat down to write, but felt angry about having to do it in the first place. “I felt genuinely upset that in order for me to keep doing what I had envisioned, I would have to take on this other arm,” she says. “I was coming to terms with really seeing just how much I was not represented. At all. It’s still a hard pill to swallow. And to keep waking up to the same world.”

At first, Lee says, the scripts she wrote were “a lot of goo, honestly just terrible.” But over time she gained confidence, and along with her friend Jason Kim, who was a story editor on *Girls* and is currently a producer for the HBO show *Barry*, began to build a show around a scheming Korean



Lee wears a suit by Eckhaus Latta and mules by Christian Wijnants. Chair: LC1 by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand from Cassina.

woman in Los Angeles who has expensive taste and may or may not be committing crimes to fuel her desires. “She’s almost like the most whitewashed version of myself,” Lee says. “Like if I lived in Brentwood. And if I was modeling myself off a Barbie doll.”

They called the show *Koreatown*, and pitched it to HBO in 2018. The network bought the idea right away. It has taken some time for Lee and Kim to get the process moving—she just turned in the final scripts a few days before we met—but she is confident that it will be made. She is writing the show she always wanted to see, about a complicated Asian family—one that’s sometimes on the wrong side of the law. When she compared the show to *The Sopranos* in interviews after it sold, she received some criticism from those who were worried that she would portray the Korean community in a negative light. And this is the crux of the problem, she says; there are so few shows that feature minorities that creators feel an extra burden to write feel-good stories. But Lee believes that she—and her characters—should be able to be as wicked and sardonic and morally complex as anybody else.

“People said, ‘Ooh but is that going to make Koreans look bad, like are you going to make them criminals?’” she says. “I mean that was really surprising because I thought, no one’s watching *The Sopranos* and saying ‘Oh no. We’re going to make Italians look bad!’ There is such a double standard.”

Once Lee started writing her own material, she found it difficult to stop. Now, in addition to *Koreatown*, she is working on two other projects, both feature films about Korean women. One is a farcical sitcom imagining the life of Kim Jong Un’s sister. “There’s this conspiracy theory that his right-

“The trick of being a ‘modern woman’ is ‘You have the privilege to be stretched incredibly thin.’”



hand man is actually his sister,” Lee says. “And, I just thought, there’s something so fun about ‘Okay, how do we push this female empowerment all the way to arrive at where women too can become sociopathic?’”

Her other project is a more serious endeavor. She is trying to write the story of the Kim Sisters, a Korean singing trio during the 1950s and ’60s who started entertaining GIs during the Korean War and then went on an incredibly successful tour of the United States. “They are, I think, the first, K-pop group historically,” Lee says. “They came over to the States to perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.”

The fact that the Kims’ story has been lost to time, even though they performed for Ed Sullivan 21 times, is an act of erasure that Lee feels very motivated to correct. “These women, first of all, are amazing,” she says. “They learned, I think, 20 instruments each. They’re musical prodigies. They had to learn English to survive... And no one knows who they are.”

While Lee is working behind the scenes to address historical invisibility, she is becoming more and more visible in front of the camera. She appeared recently in Leslye Headland’s cult hit *Russian Doll* as a bohemian friend throwing Natasha Lyonne a birthday party (over, and over and over). Because of the cyclical conceit of the show, viewers hear Lee coo the line “Sweet Birthday Baby!” at the top of almost every episode. Now, people regularly bark the line at her on the street.

“That’s a new thing,” she says, as we finish our last bites of toast slathered in tahini and berry jam. “I feel like I’ve been doing this for a long time, but I’ve never had a catchphrase.”

While Lee feels more or less indifferent about becoming a meme,

she says her three-year-old son, Apollo, gets a kick out of it. “He’s a very exuberant chatty fellow,” she says. “And he likes to point out all the time that it’s not Mommy’s birthday.” Apollo is big brother to Raphael, who was born just last year.

At the moment, Lee’s life feels like a delicate balancing act. She’s trying to juggle a family (she’s one of the only people she knows with two kids under five), a New York apartment (she still doesn’t want to move back to LA, though she realizes it’s probably inevitable), an acting career (she’ll be in *Russian Doll*’s top-secret second season) and the chance to shepherd to the screen the sort of stories she never saw growing up. “I think that the trick of being a ‘modern woman’ is like ‘You have the privilege to be stretched incredibly thin,’” she says, slurping down a second cup of coffee.

After we meet, Lee has to run to Brooklyn to go to couples therapy with her husband (they are doing great, they just go for maintenance), then pick up Apollo and Raphael (“my children for better or for worse are undeniably 98% of my existence right now”), then go over *Koreatown* scripts, then prepare to fly to Europe to film a new television show that she can’t yet discuss. It’s a jam-packed life, but she is far happier having too much work to do than she was serving ramen, daydreaming about someone writing a good part for her. One day, she simply got angry enough, and tired enough of waiting around, to write her own dream role. And now, she’ll be able to create similar opportunities for other women like herself. She no longer needs to fantasize about becoming the Korean Natalie Portman of her generation; she’s her generation’s one and only Greta Lee.