

TO RISE FROM THE EMBERS

Princess June, a novel

By Veronica Lee

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Review by Mary Lee Vance

During a June 2000 Korean War 50th anniversary commemoration ceremony in Washington, D.C., an adult mixed-race Korean adoptee, interviewed by a Washington Post reporter, was quoted wondering out loud whether any of the veterans in attendance could possibly be her father. The question captured succinctly the thoughts of thousands of Korean adoptees, who wonder daily who their birth parents are. To the mixed race adoptee attending the anniversary ceremony, it was not improbable that one of the servicemen present could well have been her biological father.

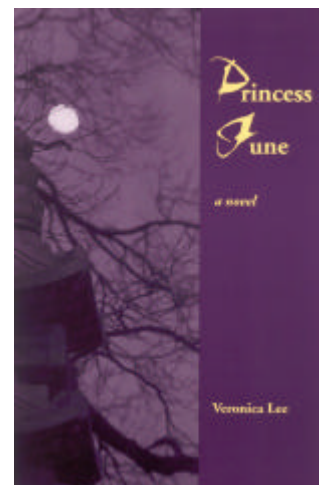
Princess June is a novel that presents one scenario, although possibly an atypical one, of a Korean woman who meets and falls in love with an American serviceman, and eventually gives birth to a mixed race child. The story does a magnificent job capturing the essence and strength of an idealized yet tragic Korean birth mother. Mixed race Korean adoptees are sure to find the story compelling, as the novel humanizes the plight of the birth mother in such a way that most adoptees would be willing to forgive and understand.

But the story of Junee is much more complex than just a tragic and hopeful story of a woman who places her child for adoption. Although it is pivotal, the adoption is just one incident in a

complicated, violent, and eventful life that the character Junee leads as she jumps from the proverbial frying pan into the fire, escaping a cruel brother, who is an organized crime boss with influence everywhere, only to fall into the hands of those who would exploit her just as badly or worse. She also meets good friends along the way. But it is not until she gets some protection in the form of a truly kind and powerful employer, who is backed up by an authoritative military police officer, that she can relax enough to keep real friends in her life without fearing for their safety as well.

The protagonist relates the story in a series of flashbacks, as she tells her therapist how she grew from an innocent child, abandoned and without a mother, to a mother who, in her own

estimation, has repeated the same tragic pattern with her own daughter. Against impossible odds, the child Junee manages to grow up into a kind, generous, and giving individual.



This rather unlikely result of a violent and abusive upbringing is explained through a promise that the child Junee one day makes to herself that she will never be like her brother - that despite all the violence and crime she is forced to participate in and witness, she will remain good on the inside and try to do only good to others. She stays true to this promise, which engenders constant resentment and irritation in her brother. She also has flashes of spiritual insight, which increase as the story progresses, that a higher power is in control of her life, and that she should go on.

Junee's father is a pimp, gangster, money launderer and extortionist. In frustration their mother abandons the family when June is a toddler and the brother only five years older than his sister. She and her older brother Hosuk nurture a lifelong hatred and fear of their abusive father.

After the war, and after moving to Seoul, seven-year-old Junee is put in charge of the housekeeping and cooking. She is beaten regularly by her father for slight mistakes, and lives in constant fear. Isolated at home, forbidden to go to school, and heavily chaperoned by her father's henchmen whenever she goes out, she lives in a frightening and lonely world without female companionship or friends.

One night, her father attempts to rape her. In a fury, her brother comes to her rescue, throwing their father into the street. But instead of getting better, life becomes worse as Hosuk assumes the role of tyrant and abuser. Hosuk decides that it is easier to destroy his father and take over his father's world than it would be to escape into the unknown.

Junee on the other hand, steadfastly rejects opportunities to participate in a life of crime.

Junee strategizes and eventually escapes her brother, moves to the opposite side of the city and works in a series of jobs. At each one, she proves to be a fast learner. Her empathetic personality, beauty, and her quick mastery of English (learned by watching television and listening to the radio), cause the male customers fall in love with her, and even follow her around from job to job.

Always on the move, and constantly worried about being caught by her brother, Junee is oblivious to her stunning good looks. Despite numerous overtures, Junee refuses to get involved with any of the men she meets. Eventually, Junee earns the nickname Princess June because of her untouchable and chaste reputation.

After being involved in a brutal assault, Junee accepts the friendship of an older police officer who is bent on saving young girls from the streets. Through this association she finds her first true security in being placed in a job in a respectable restaurant, which is under the protection of the police. Junee also accepts the friendship of an American named Sparky. In turn, Sparky introduces her to the man who would become the father of her baby. Junee and her lover move in together. He promises to marry her and send for her upon his return to the States.

When Junee delivers a beautiful blond daughter, her American lover proves to be a wonderful and attentive father. However, as with so many other tragic love stories involving Korean women

and overseas servicemen, her lover returns to the States and eventually cuts off communication with her. Junee is then forced to give up her infant daughter for international adoption, after painfully realizing that a mixed race child in Korea would have a more difficult life than even her own.

In making this final, irreversible decision, Junee becomes closer to her birth mother. She finally understands how much her mother loved her, even as her mother had abandoned her and her brother. Junee realizes that her mother had loved her, just as she had loved her daughter, the one that she was about to forsake to adoption.

Princess June is not a story of star-crossed lovers, doomed to eternal unhappiness, because Junee and her lover are equally unwilling to sacrifice for each other. Further, Junee likewise rejects the notion of eternal unhappiness, deciding instead that she is fortunate to have had one love in her life, and that her life will indeed go on.

The story ends far from tragically. She is still fast friends with Sparky, possibly more than friends. She is living well, thinking about education and self-improvement. She is behaving as a truly self-actualized person, although one who experiences residual pain at having achieved self-empowerment at such a high price. More accurately, Junee is like a phoenix that gets burned yet rises from the embers more beautiful and stronger than ever. It is the story of a daughter wanting to know more about her mother and in the process learning more about herself.

Although this is Lee's first book, it is hoped that this will not be her last. Lee is truly a talented storyteller. Her book was a delight to read.

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