

GUEST: JULIET LEE

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My earliest memory would be where I'm lying down on the bed. I must have been about two or three. And the wind blowing the curtains in and out of the house, and I'm thinking, Oh, I'm here. Something about being here in this world.

How many of us are so self aware that we can describe what was surrounding us when we were only two years old? Through the very aware eyes of Juliet Lee, who writes under the name, Juliet S. Kono, we see life as it is, filled with duty, sorrow, and happiness.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. If you were born in the 1940s or earlier, you've lived through a world war, and you've seen Hawaii grow from a quiet plantation-based society to a center of commerce. For Juliet Lee, who is also the Hawaii author and poet known as Juliet S. Kono, observations of growing up in Hilo, like the *hapuu* that her mother used for growing orchids, the flying ashes of sugarcane fires, a tsunami tearing through Hilo town are the ones that are locked in her mind forever. And these experiences shaped the story of her life.**

You were a blackout baby.

Right.

And you've written about it. What does that mean?

I was born during the war, during the blackout, so we were called blackout babies. That was in 1943, and my mom went to the hospital, Matayoshi Hospital. I was born in Matayoshi Hospital. And so, I wrote a poem about being a blackout baby. Yeah.

And that means the windows were pinned with ...

Black. I mean, all the window were painted, I think.

Oh, painted?

Yeah.

And then there were gas masks hanging on the walls, that you said looked like insects.

[CHUCKLE] Right. And the light bulbs were all painted black, just the bottom of the light bulb. You know how they are pear-shaped?

M-hm.

But just the bottom had this light shaft that would come down.

So everybody had to go to bed early, because lights off.

Lights off, right.

And I think you talked about looking at the ceiling and watching shadows dance.

Right. [CHUCKLE]

What happened to you when you were three?

Well, it was just before I was three, actually, and it was April Fool's Day. The tsunami came in 1946. And early in the morning, my mother was saying, Daddy, look outside, it seems so strange with the water receding. And my father said, Yeah, it's so strange. And they were having breakfast about seven o'clock.

And you lived right on the edge of the water?

Water, right in front of Liliuokalani Park, the Japanese tea garden. I guess my parents didn't think anything of it, until they heard people yelling and screaming, It's a tidal wave, it's a tidal wave.

In those days, no public education about tsunami.

Right.

No early warning.

No early warning. And my father saw the wave coming in near the breakwater, so he said he's going to run down to start the car.

What kind of car?

A Model T; it was a brand new car. I think it was a Ford Model T, with a rumble seat. I'm not sure, but that's the image I have. And my mother said okay, she's going to get some of her valuables together, and she woke up my aunt, who was living with us at the time. She woke her up, and gave me to my aunt to take care of, and my mother grabbed my sister. But by that time, the first wave hit. We don't know what happened to our dad, because the water took the house, and sort of floated it. And we were floating, until we banged into the neighbor's and a mango tree of some sort, or another tree, and the house started breaking apart. So I remember, I think I remember, or I don't know if my mother told me this, but my grandmother said, You young ones go, leave me. And I don't know if I remember this, but she was waving to us.

And she stayed in the breaking up house?

The house. Holding onto a post. But my aunt took me, and she fell in a hole, so she was trying to lift me up so I could breathe above the water. And somebody took me. Saw me [CHUCKLE], and took me, but left her in the hole. We lost my mom, sight of her and my sister. But in the meantime, my mother said she was hurt by the barbed wire left from after the war, because they had all the coastline with barbed wire. And, anyway, we all got out of it.

Everybody?

Everybody lived.

How did you all find each other?

Well, my mother had my sister, of course, and my aunt walked out of the water. And my father, he said he went out with the car, and then he came ... in with the car.

And who were you with, the two-year-old?

With a family. I remember he took me into the bed of his truck, and my mother found me with this family. And I don't remember his name anymore. But my grandmother was found in a tree late in the afternoon. When my father went to look for her, she was found in a tree. And the boy, she said, that put her on the tree, he died.

Oh.

He was washed away. But we survived. But it plunged us into deep poverty.

You lost everything.

We lost everything. Our car was like a pancake. And my mother salvaged some *kimonos*, and I remember her washing.

Did you have money in the house, or did—

Everything was ...

Everything was in the house?

Yeah; gone. If she salvaged something, I don't recall. Later, they found a *tansu* with her *kimono* and things, but everything was gone. So, we went to live in a rental, first with our grandparents in Kaiwiki. But, the house was so small, the plantation house was so small, so my parents found a rental in town, and that's where we lived for another ... well, my parents lived for, I think, until 1964, until they could finally build their own home.

Now, being plunged into poverty is something. What about emotional effects?

Well, I'm sure my mother suffered from post-traumatic syndrome. But, nobody knew about it then, or spoke about it. Because I remember her crying, washing her *kimonos*, crying. And I'm sure it's my father, like, I mean, old Japanese style; Enough already! Stop your crying! [CHUCKLE]

In your book, *Anshu*, the beginning is set in the Hilo area, and the rest is in Japan. But poverty is a recurring theme.

Right.

And I really felt it as you wrote about it, just what day-by-day living was like, and looking for ways to nourish yourself, and find things, and wheedle things, and cajole things, and buy things cheaply. Did that come from personal experience?

I think so, in some ways. My parents were very frugal, and I remember my mother having vanda flowers, having my father go out to buy *hapuu* stands so we could have a vanda patch in the back of our rental, so that she could pick flowers and sell them for a penny apiece. And my sister and I would collect *shoyu* gallons and give it to a guava juice maker for five cents a gallon.

And that money was important?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] It was important. And during summers, when we were old enough, we came to Dole Pineapple Company to work there. And so, yeah,

we were entrepreneurial in a sense. Because I remember I wanted a pair of red shoes at one time, so I cooked a lot of cookies, and I made little packets, and went around the neighborhood selling it. But then somebody told me, Shame, [CHUCKLE] to do this. So I stopped.

Were you hungry at times?

Oh, no, no. Oh, never.

Not that hungry.

No.

Not that broke.

Yeah. Well, you know, my father worked, and my mother worked.

And what did your mom and dad do?

Well, my father was a service station attendant, and my mother was a Baker I at Waiakea Waena School.

As a cafeteria worker?

Yeah; m-hm. So she had a State job.

And meanwhile, you would spend some holidays with your grandparents in Kaiwika. Big room to play in. They had a small plantation acreage, right?

Right. They were, what do you call, plantation cane growers. I mean, they leased land from the plantation, from Hilo Sugar Mill, I think. And it was wonderful there. We could run around, and nobody told us anything. We played in the cane fields, and we played in the streams, and we caught crayfish, and you know, it was idyllic there.

Were there the seeds of a writer in you back then?

The first time I wrote was in third grade. And I wrote a story, a Halloween story, about my mother wearing a white robe, and it was Halloween, and I bumped into her late at night, and you know, I was very scared, and I screamed and carried on. And tried to make the story very dramatic. And my sister said later, when she read the story, she said, You shouldn't lie, or, You shouldn't—you know, that's not the way it was. And she was my first critic. [CHUCKLE]

You'd taken poetic license. You made it dramatic.

I made it dramatic. And I don't know if she remembers it, but I remember her saying, You know, that's not the way it happened. [CHUCKLE]

There would be another visit from a tsunami, and that, too, would affect you. In 1960, you were a teenager then.

Right. I was a teenager, and I remember being sort of borderline juvenile delinquent, I suppose. [CHUCKLE] So we were out late that night with a bunch of boys that I knew, and a couple of girls. But then, we had heard about the tsunami warning, so we said, Oh, I think we all better go home. And we didn't know what time it was going to be. They said it was about midnight, so we waited. And all of a sudden, we heard this great tremendous noise coming in. And the water came right up to the street where we lived, on Kilauea Avenue, and below that, everything was rubble. And people were screaming, and coming out of the water. And next day, I learned that a friend of mine, one of the boys that we hung around with, Clarence Imada, had died.

In her present life, Juliet Lee is an ordained Buddhist minister, as well as Juliet S. Kono, the Hawaii novelist, short story writer, and poet. Her Buddhist perspective is that life on this Earth is full of pain and suffering. Still, she's often heard laughing. She has learned to find happiness every day, and to approach life head-on without sugarcoating or smug answers. Read her work, and you'll feel her candor. And when you ask her about her teenage years, she recalls she ran away from home, smoked too many cigarettes, and drank a little too much, causing her parents much concern.

Oh, yeah. They were so worried, I think, and, you know, they were distressed. They were very, very unhappy. [CHUCKLE]

And your attitude about it was?

I didn't know what I wanted to be or do, or you know, so I just did the best I could, and I really needed to grow up, I suppose.

When did you leave Hilo? You've been a Honolulu resident for a long time now.

Right. I left home when I graduated high school.

Hilo High?

Hilo High. And then, I came to the University of Hawaii, and tried and failed, and tried and failed, over and over again.

Why? Why do you think you failed?

I got married. I got pregnant, and then I got married. And even before that, I don't think I was motivated, or I didn't know how to be a good student. And so, I didn't try. And I got married, I had my children. I didn't go to school for a long time, and then I started going back, but then, I decided that I needed a job. So I went to work for the Police Department for many years.

What'd you do there?

I was a police radio dispatcher.

Oh. So that required quick thinking and good directions.

Right; right.

Kind of being in the thick of things.

Right.

Did you enjoy it?

Yeah. I enjoyed it, but then I also felt there were times that were very difficult. When children got hurt or people got hurt, or things happened, and there's a lot of things that you're privy to, and you wonder, Oh, how do things happen?

Yeah. At the end, there were times when we had some scary things happen. And that's where I met my husband, too.

At the Police Department?

At the Police Department. [CHUCKLE]

Was he a policeman?

Oh, no, no. He was a police radio dispatcher.

You grew up so tied to your Nisei parents.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

And your Issei grandparents.

Parents, right.

And your Buddhism has been a continuing thread through your life. But you have an interracial marriage.

Yes.

That's where you didn't go Japanese.

[CHUCKLE] No.

Tell me about that.

Well, my first husband was Japanese. And he carried a lot of the old Japanese style. [CHUCKLE] The man is the head of the family kind of thing. And I don't know, it wasn't that I said to myself, Oh, I'm going to get married to somebody of a different race or anything. It just happened that we fell in love. And so, it was just that. And it just happened that he was *Haole*. [CHUCKLE]

Was there any dissidence along the way with your family, or with you?

No. My parents accepted him right away. They liked him very much. And he's very easygoing, so yeah.

And were you accepted by his family?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. His mother said, Yeah, oh, welcome into the home, and everything.

Imagine working an overnight shift as a police dispatcher, waiting to send police officers to a robbery or a domestic argument, or a murder. Great inspiration for a writer. For Juliet Lee, better known as author Juliet S. Kono, the motivation to write came out of just trying to stay awake.

During nightshift, we tried to stay awake. Because otherwise, our heads would be nodding and you shouldn't do that, and sometimes we had this red mark on the top of our heads. [CHUCKLE] So anyway, I started writing, reading a lot and writing, and I created my first manuscript at that time. And then, I thought I really don't know much about the world, so I think I better go to school. So that's when I went back to school. I mean, I wanted to go back to school, and motivated. I was a nontraditional student when I went back, one of the first few nontraditional students.

And this time, it took.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] And I graduated with my son. Yeah, for my BA. And then, I went on to get my master's.

It seems to me you've learned an awful lot, apart from school. Because so many things have happened in your life, and which you've written about and shared with others.

Right; right.

You have this ability to be very honest. And not in ways I mean, in ways that show what is, as opposed to worrying about how it makes you look, how it makes the other person look. It's as if you accept, and you lay it out there.

Right. I have a philosophy. I guess it's kind of a Buddhist background that says, you are what you are, you can't hide anything, that's you. And I guess people say, Oh, wow, you don't feel uncomfortable with it, what you're saying sometimes. And I say, No, I don't think so, not anymore. Maybe when we were younger, I thought, Oh, I'm not gonna say this, because it's too shameful. But, it's part of living. Everybody goes through all kinds of things, so I don't think I'm any different from anybody else.

It's very human, but on the other hand, I'm sure a lot of people haven't heard it expressed. For example, when you speak of caring for your mother-in-law, and how aggravating it could be, how she would shoot the grateful looks to your husband, but for you, she had no aloha. But you were bathing her and taking care of her, and she wanted to be kind of the queen of the house.

The house; right. She was the queen bee. [CHUCKLE]

And you said, sometimes it got ludicrous, this sort of competition.

Yes.

But on the other hand, it was a real part of the day, and who would make the first stand in the day.

Yeah. I wrote about her. In *Tsunami Years*, I wrote about her, and I wrote about my mother's depression, and then later, I wrote about my son's death. So, that book has these three areas that I talk about. And people say, Oh, aren't you afraid of talking about your son in this manner? And I said, No, he had a drug problem, and he had a mental problem, and so ten years after he was put into Kaneohe, ten years later, he had died. So, I mean people say, Oh, I'm sorry, but there's nothing really to be really sorry about. That was his life, and we kind of accept it.

Have you self-edited, self-censored?

Lois Ann Yamanaka always talked about the kernel of truth. There's some kernel of truth in writing. And we take this kernel, and we explode it, and fictionalize a lot of things, and make it different in a way that, yeah, it's not really, really sometimes the way it happened. We do a kind of verbal acrobatics to make it better. [CHUCKLE] This is what my mother said when she first read *Hilo Rains*, and she was afraid. She said, Oh, what are you saying in these poems? And she read it, and she said, It sounds better, our lives sound better. [CHUCKLE]

For most writers, the characters, words, and emotions come from within. They pull moments and memories from their lives to form their stories. As a writer, Juliet S. Kono, known in her personal life as Juliet Lee, dips into that well of her life, composing words that can at times provide meaning and comfort to our lives.

You wrote an entire book called *Anshu: Dark Sorrow*, and *Tsunami Years* was all about tragic events and lives. So you've spent a lot of time thinking about sorrow and sadness.

Sadness, yeah, and sorrow. People say, Oh, you're usually, very happy every day. [CHUCKLE] And yet, where does that all come from? And I say, I don't know, it's just what I think about a lot. Because things are so random sometimes, you have to really try to understand these things.

There's a passage in your book *Anshu*, which I would love if you would read to us. It seems to me, it's the question we all ask ourselves at times of pain and distress and deep disappointment. And in this case, a mother has lost her baby to radiation sickness after the Hiroshima bombing. And she asks her Buddhist priest, Why did this happen? And here's what you wrote.

Okay. Why did this happen?, I asked, looking up at him. No one knows. There are no answers to death, the hearts of men, the will of countries, the way of the world. We can only accept things as they are in a tragedy like this. But what happened to us, to Sumie, everyone, is difficult for me to accept. Aren't you the least bit angry? I understand the anger, but anger carries with it a different kind of destruction. It will eat at your heart if you give in to it, to no avail. It will only leave you unhappy and troubled. I guess I don't understand anything.

And to say that is a lot better than a pat answer, isn't it?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

You know, you hear a lot of things said to try to relieve distress. For example, this mother who lost her child, Don't worry, you'll have another one.

Another one. Yes.

There are some answers that simply are not ... I mean, that overstretch or take you into a deeper place.

Right. It's hard, for parents, to explain to children why tragedy happens, and why things are so random sometimes, and it has no real meaning to things that happen. And I don't know how people, you know, get through things sometimes, but we're humans, and with time and everything, all things can be overcome, to me.

This Hilo girl grew up to be a Honolulu-based writer who commands words with power and delicacy. Under the name Juliet S. Kono, she wrote the award-winning novel, *Anshu: Dark Sorrow*, also poetry books *Hilo Rains* and *Tsunami Years*, and she's published short stories. She also is a wife and Buddhist priest, Juliet Lee, who looks at life unflinchingly, while striving for happiness. For PBS Hawaii, and *Long Story Short*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.