

Dear Reader,

The “melting pot.”

The nail that sticks out gets hammered.

The tall tree catches the wind.

These were ideas and proverbs about blending in that I heard growing up as an immigrant in the 1970s. Hearing my parents repeat the nail proverb, I knew that the best way to survive was to keep my head down and not stand out. Even *Schoolhouse Rock!* got into the act with “The Great American Melting Pot.”

But how to do that? I looked different, which couldn’t be hidden. Even *Schoolhouse Rock!* knew that. When it exhorts the child to “go on and ask your grandma what she has to tell, how great to be American and something else as well,” the grandma is revealed to be of Polish heritage. Even as a child, I noticed that it wouldn’t have worked with a family that looked like mine.

Again, how do we melt in? We could release our cultural heritage. And, if my family did keep something, it meant keeping it within our home and away from eyes that would find it odd.

The consequence was that many children of immigrants like me lost our connection to that culture and, indeed, came to see our cultural heritage as something to be kept at arm’s length.

When I started thinking about the idea behind *Unhappy Camper*, I wondered if my story was still relevant in today’s world. Do kids still reject their cultural heritage? Although not all, much of American society does see foreign culture as something to be celebrated. But, in a way,

middle school still operates like it's the 1970s. Melting in, not being the nail sticking out, and not being the tall tree are survival mechanisms there.

Still, was that enough to tell this story? But then I read testimonials on the website of a Taiwanese American organization that runs heritage summer camps. When I read that the participants relate to how they felt disconnected from their cultural heritage and that attending the camp brought back that piece of themselves, I knew that my story was relevant.

In *Unhappy Camper*, Michelle learns to reclaim her cultural heritage and the close sister ties she had lost because of that rejection. And, in the process, she not only gains the courage to reveal that part of herself in public, but rather—

To not melt in.

To be the nail that sticks out.

To be the tree that stands tall.

Thank you for reading *Unhappy Camper* and I hope that it resonates with you.

~~Lily LaMotte