MEET
CHERYLENE LEE

It's hard to imagine a successful stage, movie, and TV performer becoming a paleontologist, but that's just what Cherylene Lee did. Like the narrator in "Hollywood and the Pits," Lee was a child performer in her hometown of Los Angeles. After earning degrees in paleontology and geology, she began writing stories, poetry, and plays.


READING FOCUS
Are there parts of your childhood self that you have left behind in the past few years?

Journal
Describe how your interests and hobbies have—or have not—changed in the last year or two. Write about how becoming a teenager has affected your childhood interests.

Setting a Purpose
Read to discover one teen's view on change.

BUILDING BACKGROUND
The Time and Place It is 1968 in Los Angeles, California. In the middle of the city, close to the glamour of Hollywood, is an archaeological site filled with the skeletons of prehistoric creatures.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

obsessed (ob sesd') adj. overly concentrated or focused on a single emotion or idea; p. 118
bewildered (bi wil' dar'd) adj. very confused; p. 118
barrage (ba rázh') n. a heavy concentration or great outpouring, as of words; p. 119
excavated (eks' ka vât' ad) adj. uncovered or removed by digging; unearthed; p. 119
immobilize (i mô' bê liz') v. to make unable to move; fix in place; p. 119
painstaking (pänz' tā' king) adj. requiring close, careful labor or attention; p. 123
predator (pred' a tar) n. an animal, such as a lion or hawk, that kills other animals for food; p. 125
deception (di sept' shan) n. that which fools or misleads; p. 125
scavenger (skav' in jar) n. an animal, such as a hyena or vulture, that feeds on dead, decaying animals; p. 125
In 1968 when I was fifteen, the pit opened its secret to me. I breathed, ate, slept, dreamed about the La Brea Tar Pits. I spent summer days working the archaeological dig and in dreams saw the bones glistening, the broken pelvises, the skulls, the vertebrae looped like a woman’s pearls hanging on an invisible cord. I welcomed those dreams. I wanted to know where the next skeleton was, identify it, record its position, discover whether it was whole or not. I wanted to know where to dig in the coarse, black, gooey sand. I lost myself there and found something else.

1. La Brea (la bré’ a)
2. An archaeological (ár’ kē a loj’ i kai) dig is a place where objects such as ancient bones are dug up for study.
Hollywood and the Pits

My mother thought something was wrong with me. Was it good for a teenager to be fascinated by death? Especially animal death in the Pleistocene? Was it normal to be so obsessed by a sticky brown hole in the ground in the center of Los Angeles? I don’t know if it was normal or not, but it seemed perfectly logical to me. After all, I grew up in Hollywood, a place where dreams and nightmares can often take the same shape. What else would a child actor do?

“Thank you very much, dear. We’ll be letting you know.”

I knew what that meant. It meant I would never hear from them again. I didn’t get the job. I heard that phrase a lot that year.

I walked out of the plush office, leaving behind the casting director, producer, director, writer, and whoever else came to listen to my reading for a semiregular role on a family sit-com. The carpet made no sound when I opened and shut the door.

I passed the other girls waiting in the reception room, each poring over her script. The mothers were waiting in a separate room, chattering about their daughters’ latest commercials, interviews, callbacks, jobs. It sounded like every Oriental kid in Hollywood was working except me.

My mother used to have a lot to say in those waiting rooms. Ever since I was three, when I started at the Meglin Kiddie Dance Studio, I was dubbed “The Chinese Shirley Temple”—always the one to be picked at auditions and interviews, always the one to get the speaking lines, always called “the one-shot kid,” because I could do my scenes in one take—even tight close-ups. My mother would only talk about me behind my back because she didn’t want me to hear her brag, but I knew that she was proud. In a way I was proud too, though I never dared admit it. I didn’t want to be called a show-off. But I didn’t exactly know what I did to be proud of either. I only knew that at fifteen I was now being passed over at all these interviews when before I would be chosen.

My mother looked at my face hopefully when I came into the room. I gave her a quick shake of the head. She looked bewildered. I felt bad for my mother then. How could I explain it to her? I didn’t understand it myself. We left saying polite good-byes to all the other mothers.

We didn’t say anything until the studio parking lot, where we had to search for our old blue Chevy among rows and rows of parked cars baking in the Hollywood heat.

“How did it go? Did you read clearly? Did you tell them you’re available?”

“I don’t think they care if I’m available or not, Ma.”

“Didn’t you read well? Did you remember to look up so they could see your eyes? Did they ask you if you could play the piano? Did you tell them you could learn?”

Vocabulary

- obsessed (əb sēst’) adj. overly concentrated or focused on a single emotion or idea
- bewildered (bə wil’ dard) adj. very confused
The barrage of questions stopped when we finally spotted our car. I didn’t answer her. My mother asked about the piano because I lost out in an audition once to a Chinese girl who already knew how to play.

My mother took off the towel that shielded the steering wheel from the heat. “You’re getting to be such a big girl,” she said, starting the car in neutral. “But don’t worry, there’s always next time. You have what it takes. That’s special.” She put the car into forward and we drove through a parking lot that had an endless number of identical cars all facing the same direction. We drove back home in silence.

In the La Brea Tar Pits many of the excavated bones belong to juvenile mammals. Thousands of years ago thirsty young animals in the area were drawn to watering holes, not knowing they were traps. Those inviting pools had false bottoms made of sticky tar, which immobilized its victims and preserved their bones when they died. Innocence trapped by ignorance. The tar pits record that well.

I suppose a lot of my getting into show business in the first place was a matter of luck—being in the right place at the right time. My sister, seven years older than me, was a member of the Meglin Kiddie Dance Studio long before I started lessons. Once during the annual recital held at the Shrine Auditorium, she was spotted by a Hollywood agent who handled only Oriental performers. The agent sent my sister out for a role in the CBS Playhouse 90 television show The Family Nobody Wanted. The producer said she was too tall for the part. But true to my mother’s training of always having a positive reply, my sister said to the producer, “But I have a younger sister . . .” which started my show-biz career at the tender age of three.

My sister and I were lucky. We enjoyed singing and dancing, we were natural hams, and our parents never discouraged us. In fact they were our biggest fans. My mother chauffeured us to all our dance lessons, lessons we begged to take. She drove us to interviews, took us to studios, went on location with us, drilled us on our lines, made sure we kept up our schoolwork and didn’t sass back the tutors hired by studios to teach us for three hours a day. She never complained about being a stage mother. She said that we made her proud.

My father must have felt pride too, because he paid for a choreographer to put together our sister act: “The World Famous Lee Sisters,” fifteen minutes of song and dance, real vaudeville stuff. We joked about that a

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Vocabulary

barrage (bə rāz′) n. a heavy concentration or great outpouring, as of words

excavated (eks′ kə vāt′ əd) adj. uncovered or removed by digging; unearthed

immobilize (i mō′ ba līz′) v. to make unable to move; fix in place

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6. A choreographer creates or directs dance movements.
lot, "Yeah, the Lee Sisters—Ug-Lee and Home-Lee," but we definitely had a good time. So did our parents. Our father especially liked our getting booked into Las Vegas at the New Frontier Hotel on the Strip. He liked to gamble there, though he said the craps tables in that hotel were "cold," not like the casinos in downtown Las Vegas, where all the "hot" action took place.

In Las Vegas our sister act was part of a show called "Oriental Holiday." The show was about a Hollywood producer going to the Far East, finding undiscovered talent, and bringing it back to the U.S. We did two shows a night in the main showroom, one at eight and one at twelve, and on weekends a third show at two in the morning. It ran the entire summer often to standing-room-only audiences—a thousand people a show.

Our sister act worked because of the age and height difference. My sister then was fourteen and nearly five foot two; I was seven and very small for my age—people thought we were cute. We had song-and-dance routines to old tunes like
“Ma, He’s Making Eyes at Me,” “Together,” and “I’m Following You,” and my father hired a writer to adapt the lyrics to “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” which came out “We Enjoy Being Chinese.” We also told corny jokes, but the Las Vegas audience seemed to enjoy it. Here we were, two kids, staying up late and jumping around, and getting paid besides. To me the applause sometimes sounded like static, sometimes like distant waves. It always amazed me when people applauded. The owner of the hotel liked us so much, he invited us back to perform in shows for three summers in a row. That was before I grew too tall and the sister act didn’t seem so cute anymore.

Many of the skeletons in the tar pits are found incomplete—particularly the skeletons of the young, which have only soft cartilage connecting the bones. In life the soft tissue allows for growth, but in death it dissolves quickly. Thus the skeletons of young animals are more apt to be scattered, especially the vertebrae protecting the spinal cord. In the tar pits, the central ends of many vertebrae are found unconnected to any skeleton. Such bone fragments are shaped like valentines, disks that are slightly lobed—heart-shaped shields that have lost their connection to what they were meant to protect.

I never felt my mother pushed me to do something I didn’t want to do. But I always knew if something I did pleased her. She was generous with her praise, and I was sensitive when she withheld it. I didn’t like to disappoint her.

I took to performing easily, and since I had started out so young, making movies or doing shows didn’t feel like anything special. It was part of my childhood—like going to the dentist one morning or going to school the next. I didn’t wonder if I wanted a particular role or wanted to be in a show or how I would feel if I didn’t get in. Until I was fifteen, it never occurred to me that one day I wouldn’t get parts or that I might not “have what it takes.”

When I was younger, I got a lot of roles because I was so small for my age. When I was nine years old, I could pass for five or six. I was really short. I was always teased about it when I was in elementary school, but I didn’t mind because my height got me movie jobs. I could read and memorize lines that actual five-year-olds couldn’t. My mother told people she made me sleep in a drawer so I wouldn’t grow any bigger.

But when I turned fifteen, it was as if my body, which hadn’t grown for so many years, suddenly made up for lost time. I grew five inches in seven months. My mother was amazed. Even I couldn’t get used to it. I kept knocking into things, my clothes didn’t fit right, I felt awkward and clumsy when I moved. Dumb things that I had gotten away with, like paying children’s prices at the movies instead of junior admission, I couldn’t do anymore. I wasn’t a shrimp or a small fry any longer. I was suddenly normal.

Before that summer my mother had always claimed she wanted me to be normal. She didn’t want me to become spoiled by the attention I received when I was working at the studios. I still had chores to do at home, went to public school when I wasn’t working, was punished severely when I behaved badly. She didn’t want me to feel I was different just because I was in the movies. When I was eight, I was interviewed by a reporter who wanted to know if I thought I had a big head.
Hollywood and the Pits

“Sure,” I said.
“No you don’t,” my mother interrupted, which was really unusual, because she generally never said anything. She wanted me to speak for myself. I didn’t understand the question. My sister had always made fun of my head. She said my body was too tiny for the weight—I looked like a walking Tootsie Pop. I thought the reporter was making the same observation.

“She better not get that way,” my mother said fiercely. “She’s not any different from anyone else. She’s just lucky and small for her age.”

The reporter turned to my mother, “Some parents push their children to act. The kids feel like they’re used.”

“I don’t do that—I’m not that way,” my mother told the reporter.

But when she was sitting silently in all those waiting rooms while I was being turned down for one job after another, I could almost feel her wanting to shout, “Use her. Use her. What is wrong with her? Doesn’t she have it anymore?” I didn’t know what I had had that I didn’t seem to have anymore. My mother had told the reporter that I was like everyone else. But when my life was like everyone else’s, why was she disappointed?

The churning action of the La Brea Tar Pits makes interpreting the record of past events extremely difficult. The usual order of deposition—the oldest on the bottom, the youngest on the top—loses all meaning when some of the oldest fossils can be brought to the surface by the movement of natural gas. One must look for an undisturbed spot, a place untouched by the action of underground springs or natural gas or human interference. Complete skeletons become important, because they indicate areas of least disturbance. But such spots of calm are rare. Whole blocks of the tar pit can become displaced, making false sequences of the past, skewing the interpretation for what is the true order of nature.

That year before my sixteenth birthday, my mother seemed to spend a lot of time looking through my old scrapbooks, staring at all the eight-by-ten glossies of the shows that I had done. In the summer we visited with my grandmother often, since I wasn’t working and had lots of free time. I would go out to the garden to read or sunbathe, but I could hear my mother and grandmother talking.

“She was so cute back then. She worked with Gene Kelly when she was five years old. She was so smart for her age. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

“She’s fifteen.”

“She’s too young to be an ingenue and too old to be cute. The studios forget so quickly. By the time she’s old enough to play an ingenue, they won’t remember her.”

“Does she have to work in the movies? Hand me the scissors.”

My grandmother was making false eyelashes using the hair from her hairbrush. When she was young she had incredible hair. I saw an old photograph of her when it flowed beyond her waist like a cascading black waterfall. At seventy, her hair was still black as night, which made her few strands of silver look like shooting stars. But her hair had thinned greatly with age. It sometimes fell out in clumps.

7. **Skewing** (skā′ing) the interpretation is twisting it so that it is wrong or off the mark.
8. An **ingenue** (an′jə nö′ə) is an actress who plays innocent, inexperienced young women.
She wore it brushed back in a bun with a hairpiece for added fullness. My grandmother had always been proud of her hair, but once she started making false eyelashes from it, she wasn’t proud of the way it looked anymore. She said she was proud of it now because it made her useful.

It was painstaking work—tying knots into strands of hair, then tying them together to form feathery little crescents.

**Vocabulary**

*painstaking* (pánz’tə̅’king) *adj.* requiring close, careful labor or attention
Hollywood and the Pits

Her glamorous false eyelashes were much sought after. Theatrical make-up artists waited months for her work. But my grandmother said what she liked was that she was doing something, making a contribution, and besides it didn’t cost her anything. No overhead. “Till I go bald,” she often joked.

She tried to teach me her art that summer, but for some reason strands of my hair wouldn’t stay tied in knots.

“Too springy,” my grandmother said.

“You have to wait until your hair falls out, like mine. Something to look forward to, eh?” She had laughed and patted my hand. My mother was going on and on about my lack of work, what might be wrong, that something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. I heard my grandmother reply, but I didn’t catch it all: “Movies are just make-believe, not real life. Like what I make with my hair that falls out—false. False eyelashes. Not meant to last.”

The remains in the La Brea Tar Pits are mostly of carnivorous animals. Very few herbivores are found—the
ratio is five to one, a perversion of the natural food chain. The ratio is easy to explain. Thousands of years ago a thirsty animal sought a drink from the pools of water only to find itself trapped by the bottom, gooey with subterranean oil. A shriek of agony from the trapped victim drew flesh-eating predators, which were then trapped themselves by the very same ooze which provided the bait. The cycle repeated itself countless times. The number of victims grew, lured by the image of easy food, the deception of an easy kill. The animals piled on top of one another. For over ten thousand years the promise of the place drew animals of all sorts, mostly predators and scavengers—dire wolves, panthers, coyotes, vultures—all hungry for their chance. Most were sucked down against their will in those waterling holes destined to be called the La Brea Tar Pits in a place to be named the City of Angels, home of Hollywood movie stars.

I spent a lot of time by myself that summer, wondering what it was that I didn’t have anymore. Could I get it back? How could I if I didn’t know what it was?

That’s when I discovered the La Brea Tar Pits. Hidden behind the County Art Museum on trendy 11 Wilshire Boulevard, I found a job that didn’t require me to be small or cute for my age. I didn’t have to audition. No one said, “Thank you very much, we’ll call you.” Or if they did, they meant it. I volunteered my time one afternoon, and my fascination stuck—like tar on the bones of a saber-toothed tiger.

My mother didn’t understand what had changed me. I didn’t understand it myself. But I liked going to the La Brea Tar Pits. It meant I could get really messy and I was doing it with a purpose. I didn’t feel awkward there. I could wear old stained pants. I could wear T-shirts with holes in them. I could wear disgustingly filthy sneakers and it was all perfectly justified. It wasn’t a costume for a role in a film or a part in a TV sit-com. My mother didn’t mind my dressing like that when she knew I was off to the pits. That was okay so long as I didn’t track tar back into the house. I started going to the pits every day, and my mother wondered why. She couldn’t believe I would rather be groveling 12 in tar than going on auditions or interviews.

While my mother wasn’t proud of the La Brea Tar Pits (she didn’t know or care what a fossil was), she didn’t discourage me either. She drove me there, the same way she used to drive me to the studios.

“Wouldn’t you rather be doing a show in Las Vegas than scrambling around in a pit?” she asked.

“I’m not in a show in Las Vegas, Ma. The Lee Sisters are retired.” My older sister

10. Carnivorous (kär-niv’ or ar) animals eat meat; herbivores (hur’ ba-vörz’) eat mainly plants. So, the remains in the pits are a perversion because they give a false picture of reality. Subterranean means “underground."

11. Trendy describes what is currently popular, and Wilshire Boulevard is loaded with trendy shops, stores, and restaurants.

12. Groveling is lying or crawling facedown in a demeaning manner.

Vocabulary
 predator (pred’ə tar) n. an animal, such as a lion or hawk, that kills other animals for food
decception (di sep’ than) n. that which fools or misleads
scavenger (skav’ in jer) n. an animal, such as a hyena or vulture, that feeds on dead, decaying animals
Hollywood and the Pits

had married and was starting a family of her own.

"But if you could choose between . . ."
"There isn’t a choice."
"You really like this tar-pit stuff, or are you just waiting until you can get real work in the movies?"

I didn’t answer.

My mother sighed. “You could do it if you wanted, if you really wanted. You still have what it takes.”

I didn’t know about that. But then, I couldn’t explain what drew me to the tar pits either. Maybe it was the bones, finding out what they were, which animal they belonged to, imagining how they got there, how they fell into the trap. I wondered about that a lot.

At the La Brea Tar Pits, everything dug out of the pit is saved—including the sticky sand that covered the bones through the ages. Each bucket of sand is washed, sieved, and examined for pollen grains, insect remains, any evidence of past life. Even the grain size is recorded—the percentage of silt to sand to gravel that reveals the history of deposition, erosion, and disturbance. No single fossil, no one observation, is significant enough to tell the entire story. All the evidence must be weighed before a semblance of truth emerges.

The tar pits had its lessons. I was learning I had to work slowly, become observant, to concentrate. I learned about time in a way that I would never experience—not in hours, days, and months, but in thousands and thousands of years. I imagined what the past must have been like, envisioned Los Angeles as a sweeping basin, perhaps slightly colder and more humid, a time before people and studios arrived. The tar pits recorded a warming trend; the kinds of animals found there reflected the changing climate. The ones unadapted disappeared. No trace of their kind was found in the area. The ones adapted to warmer weather left a record of bones in the pit. Amid that collection of ancient skeletons, surrounded by evidence of death, I was finding a secret preserved over thousands and thousands of years. There was something cruel about natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Even those successful individuals that “had what it took” for adaptation still wound up in the pits.

I never found out if I had what it took, not the way my mother meant. But I did adapt to the truth: I wasn’t a Chinese Shirley Temple any longer, cute and short for my age. I had grown up. Maybe not on a Hollywood movie set, but in the La Brea Tar Pits.

\[\text{13. A semblance of truth would be the slightest likeness of truth.}\]

\[\text{14. (Natural . . . fittest) refers to natural selection, the theory that the plants and animals best suited to their environment tend to survive and pass on their characteristics to their offspring.}\]
PERSONAL RESPONSE

- If you were the main character, would you have continued to pursue your career as a performer? Discuss your opinions with a partner.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

RECALL
1. Describe the narrator’s career as a successful child star.
2. What begins to happen to the narrator’s success after she turns fifteen?
3. What does the narrator do in the tar pits?
4. How does the narrator’s mother react to her daughter’s lack of jobs as she becomes a teenager and her newfound interest in the tar pits?

INTERPRET
5. In your opinion, why was “The World Famous Lee Sisters” act so successful?
6. In your opinion, how does the narrator feel about the slump in her Hollywood career?
7. In your opinion, why does the narrator find working in the tar pits so rewarding?
8. How does the narrator’s relationship with her mother change over the course of the story?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT
9. Why is the story of the narrator’s life interrupted from time to time with factual material about the tar pits? What connection do you think the author is making between Hollywood and the La Brea Tar Pits?
10. Theme Connection “Hollywood and the Pits” describes the changes in one person’s life from childhood to adolescence. Does the story remind you about changes in your own life? Add these ideas to your journal entry from the Reading Focus.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Symbol
A symbol is any object, person, place, or experience that stands for more than what it is. In “Hollywood and the Pits,” the narrator uses the animals trapped in the La Brea Tar Pits to symbolize her experience as a child actor.

1. On page 119, find the statement “Innocence trapped by ignorance.” How does this phrase help you understand Lee’s use of symbolism in the story?
2. Find and explain another example of symbolism from a section of the selection printed in slanted, or italic, type.

Writing About Literature

Point of View  Most fiction is written from one of two points of view. The events are described from the point of view of either a character in the story or an unknown, all-seeing narrator. In “Hollywood and the Pits,” Cherylene Lee uses the point of view of her main character. The reader sees the events as the main character saw them. Do you think this was the most effective point of view to use for this story? Explain your opinion.

Personal Writing

Moving On  Look back at your journal entry for the Reading Focus on page 116. Write a letter to Cherylene Lee, comparing the narrator’s experience of becoming a teenager and abandoning her childhood interests with your own experience.

Internet Connection

You can find out more about prehistoric animals at many sites on the World Wide Web. Just type “prehistoric animals” in the subject window of your browser or search engine. Don’t forget the quotation marks. They help to narrow the number of choices.

Literature Groups

Follow-up Interview  The narrator tells about being interviewed when she was in the movies at age eight. Imagine that the reporter has come back ten years later to interview the narrator, again in the presence of her mother. What questions might the reporter ask, and how might the narrator’s responses differ from her mother’s? Devise questions and answers using details from the story.

Learning for Life

News Broadcast  Imagine that you are a science news reporter, and a complete skeleton of a prehistoric animal has just been discovered at the La Brea Tar Pits. First, research animals that have been found at the pits during the last ninety years. Then choose one animal, research its characteristics, and write a news story about the finding of its skeleton. Add illustrations to your story.

Reading Further

If you would like to read more about life as a child actor or about the La Brea Tar Pits, try these books:

Shirley Temple Black by James Haskins
Death Trap: The Story of the La Brea Tar Pits by Sharon Elaine Thompson

Save your work for your portfolio.
GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE • ITALICS

Italic type is a special slanted type used to set off titles of books, plays, movies, CDs, magazines, newspapers, and other long works. Italic type is also used to call out a foreign word or a word used as a word. In handwritten work, underline the words you want read as italic.

PRACTICE Write each sentence, underlining for italics where needed.
1. I read an article about fossils in National Geographic.

2. My teacher said that I overused terrifying in my review of the movie Jurassic Park.
3. Ed learned that the book Dinosaur Defeat was made into a play called The End of Their World.
4. I can't believe that the Times misspelled the word riot as rot in this morning's headline.
5. I learned from the local newspaper, Our Town, about the future filming of a movie in our city.

• For more about using italics, see Language Handbook, pp. R39–R40.

READING AND THINKING • CAUSE AND EFFECT

A cause is a condition or event that makes something happen. What happens as the result of a cause is an effect. Many events in stories are connected by cause-and-effect relationships. In “Hollywood and the Pits,” when the narrator’s older sister is too tall for a part in a TV show, the narrator gets the part. This begins her acting career.

PRACTICE Answer these questions about other causes and effects in “Hollywood and the Pits.”
1. What causes the narrator’s mother to worry that her daughter is fascinated by death?
2. What is a possible cause of the narrator’s lack of acting work?
3. What led prehistoric mammals to become trapped in the tar pits?
4. What effect did the screaming of trapped animals in the pits have on predators in the area?

• For more about cause and effect, see Reading Handbook, p. R89.

VOCABULARY • RELATED FORMS OF WORDS

If you know the meaning of happy (an adjective), you probably also know the meaning of happiness (a noun) and happily (an adverb). If you know the meaning of one form of a word, you can usually figure out the meanings of its other forms. For example, if you know that a predator hunts its food, you can figure out what predatory behavior is.

PRACTICE Use what you know about the vocabulary words in “Hollywood and the Pits” to write definitions of the underlined words below.
1. to have an obsession
2. the child’s bewilderment
3. the car’s immobilization
4. to work painstakingly
5. a deceptive statement