

KIM'S MONEY TREE

In the Heart of the
American Dream



LOS ANGELES 1992

LOGLINE

In the days leading up to the 1992 LA riots, a grieving Korean American pre-med student must keep her family's diner alive after a violent robbery, forcing her to choose between medical school and a newfound passion for cooking--and a forbidden romance with the restaurant's Mexican chef.

During the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, over 60% of the damage was caused to Korean-owned small businesses.

Korean store owners armed themselves to protect their businesses.



SETTING

Set in Los Angeles during the weeks leading up to the 1992 L.A. Riots, Kim's Korean Diner stands at the crossroads of Koreatown, Latino, and Black communities. The restaurant becomes a microcosm of the tensions, resilience, and unexpected connections that shape a city on the brink of upheaval.



Magical realism brings a mystical layer to this gritty social drama, illuminating hope amid grief, hardship, and cultural conflict.

The mother's spirit lingers beside her family through moments of joy and heartbreak, while the magical money tree serves as a symbol of immigrant resilience, perseverance, and hope.



SYNOPSIS

"Kim's Money Tree" is a story about a father and daughter, featuring an unexpected romance between a young Korean-American woman and an undocumented Mexican chef, leading up to the 1992 L.A. Riots.

Helen studies pre-med to meet her parents' American Dream but feels trapped. After a painful argument with her immigrant mother about dropping out, her mother suddenly dies of a heart attack, leaving Helen filled with regret. Struggling with grief, she turns to drugs and alcohol and steals from her father, Kim, who is trying to keep their Korean restaurant afloat after losing his wife, the head chef.

When a robbery leaves Kim hospitalized, Helen must set aside her renewed pre-med plans to save the restaurant. During this journey, guided by Carlos, the Mexican chef, she discovers her passion for cooking while learning her mother's Korean recipes, thus preserving her legacy.

Together, they expand the menu to include Mexican-inspired Korean dishes, which helps drive their financial recovery. Meanwhile, Helen falls in love with Carlos despite her father's disapproval.

Meanwhile, rising racial tensions surrounding the Rodney King verdict push their community toward the explosive events of the Riots.

As the restaurant's Mexican chef
teaches Helen her late mother's
signature Korean recipes,
she discovers a passion for
cooking and a deeper connection
to
her mother's legacy.



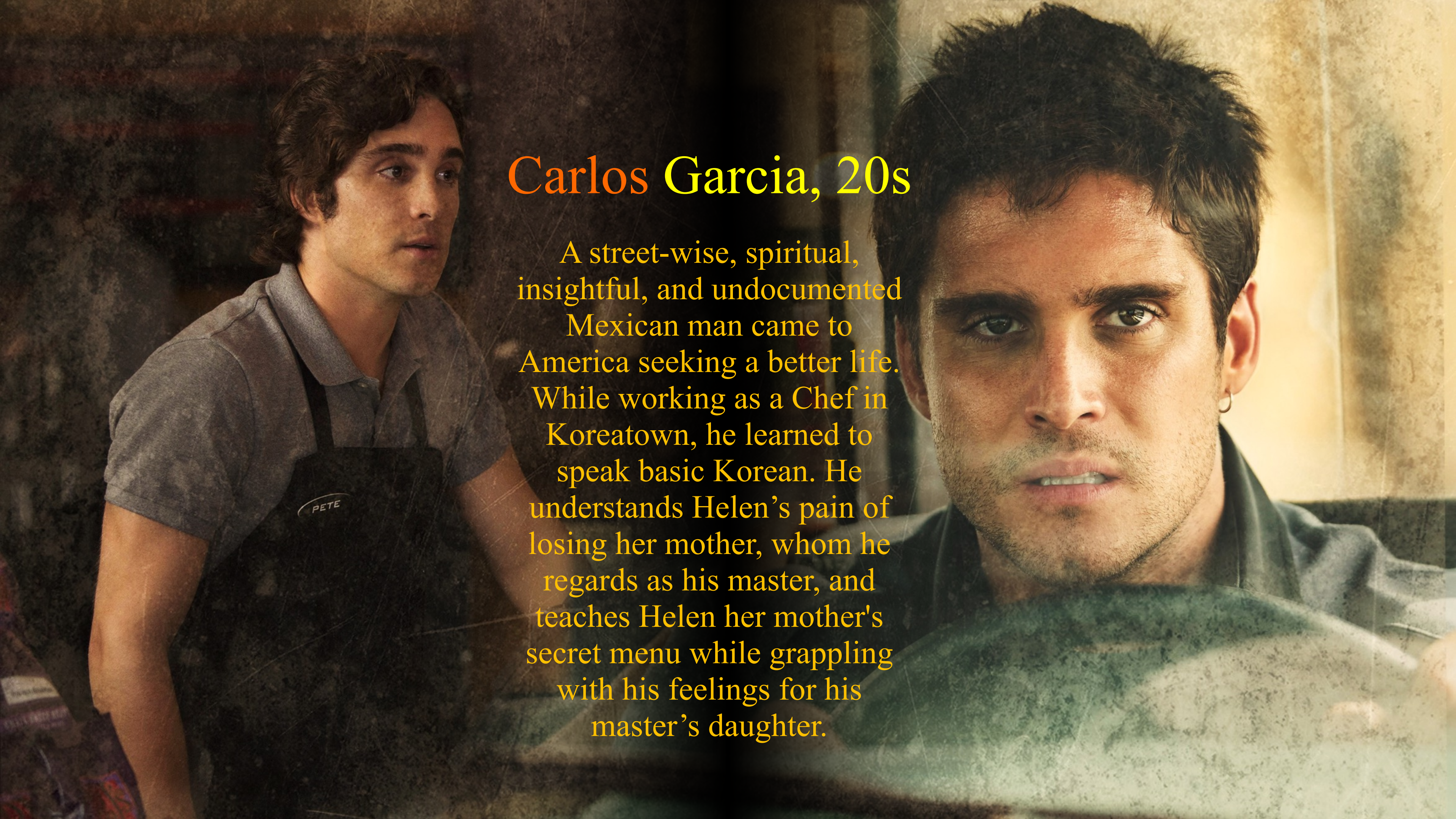


C H A R C H A C T E R S

HELEN KIM, 21

Raised to pursue her parents' American Dream, Helen has grown disconnected from her Korean language, culture, and sense of self. Trapped in a pre-med path she never truly chose, she struggles under the weight of expectations and the fear of disappointing her family. After her mother's sudden death, Helen is consumed by grief, regret, and self-destructive behavior, turning to alcohol and drugs to cope. When a violent robbery forces her to take over the family restaurant, she unexpectedly discovers a passion for cooking while learning her late mother's recipes from Carlos, the diner's Mexican chef.

As Helen falls in love with Carlos and reconnects with her cultural roots, she embarks on a journey of healing, self-discovery, and redemption.



Carlos Garcia, 20s

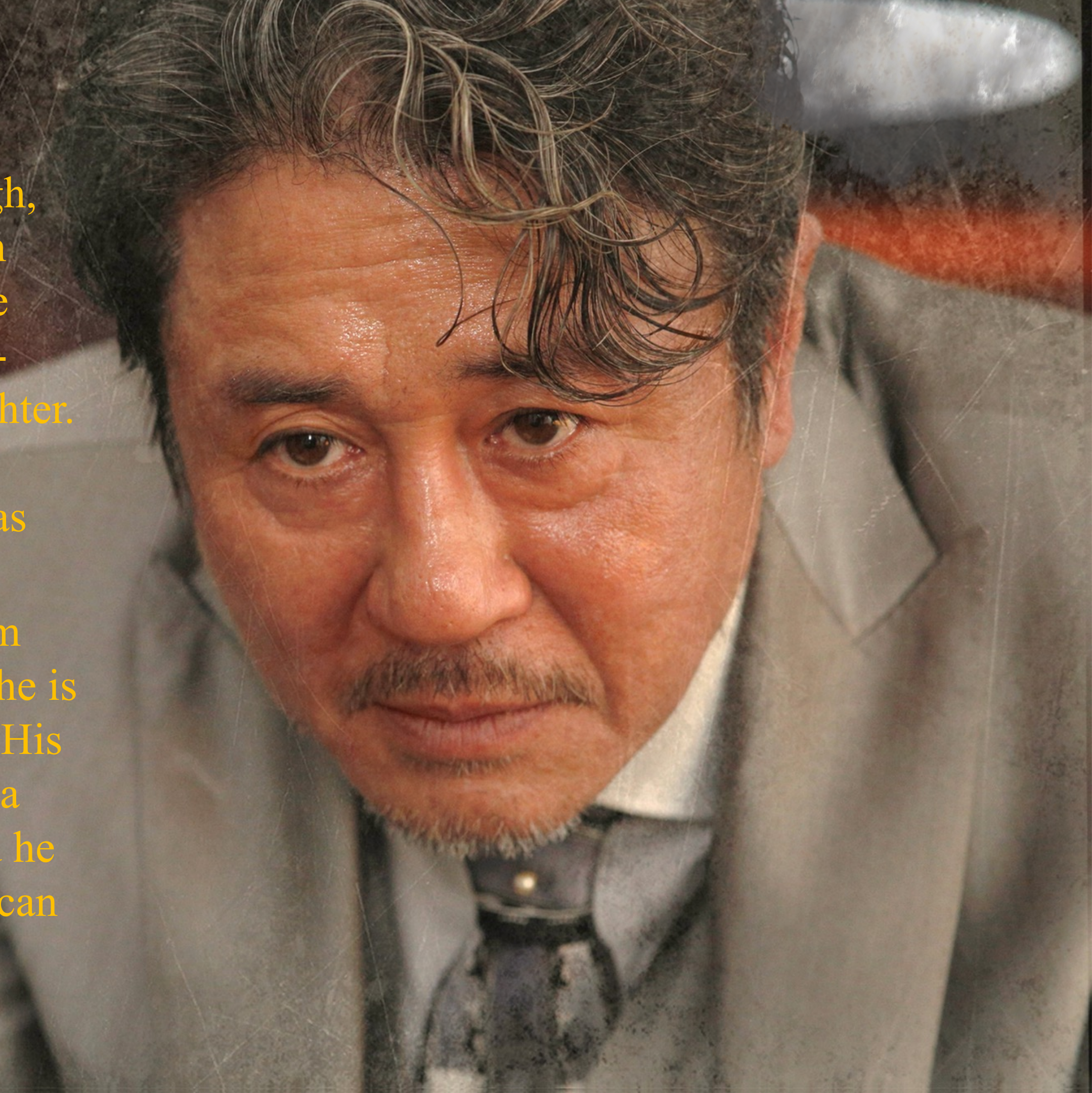
A street-wise, spiritual, insightful, and undocumented Mexican man came to America seeking a better life. While working as a Chef in Koreatown, he learned to speak basic Korean. He understands Helen's pain of losing her mother, whom he regards as his master, and teaches Helen her mother's secret menu while grappling with his feelings for his master's daughter.

MR. Kim, 50

A proud Korean immigrant, he is a tough, self-made businessman whose Korean restaurant represents his version of the American Dream. He is stubborn, hot-tempered, and authoritarian with his daughter.

Additionally, he mistrusts his Latino employees and Blacks, a feeling that has grown since a violent robbery.

A former Korean Marine and Vietnam Veteran values loyalty and kinship, and he is devoted to caring for his aging mother. His daughter, his only hope, has become a constant source of disappointment, and he pressures her to pursue his ideal American Dream of achieving success in mainstream America.





CYNTHIA JONES, 42

A no-nonsense Black mail carrier observes the daily challenges and struggles faced by Korean immigrants amid rising racial tensions leading up to the LA Riots. She possesses a wry sense of humor and has a deep understanding of the moral and ethical principles in the Koreatown community she serves. Despite her often sarcastic remarks, her caring nature helps bridge the gap with Kim, overcoming his bigotry.

COMPARABLE FILMS



A portrait of Kyung-Ja (KJ) Lee, a woman with short, curly brown hair, wearing a dark turtleneck and a green and black checkered jacket. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a gentle expression.

KYUNG-JA (KJ) LEE

Writer/Director

Lee is a Korean American filmmaker who believed thunder was caused by a giant serpent, a childhood tale her mother told. After immigrating to the U.S., her sense of mysticism deepened in her new multicultural environment.

She graduated from AFI with an award-winning short film and earned several honors, including the Rockefeller Foundation Asian Artist Fellowship and a spot in the Sundance Screenwriters Lab. After years of caring for her ill mother, Lee returned to filmmaking and directed her fifth short film, "KANG BLUE," which won the "Outstanding Female Director" award at the KATRA Film Series. Lee's recent short screenplay, THE COMFORT WOMAN STATUE, has been recognized with the Slamdance, Cinequest, the Santa Barbara Short Screenplay Award, and the Outstanding Screenplay Mentorship Award.

Lee has completed two feature scripts: "KIM'S MONEY TREE," a social drama set during the L.A. Riots, The Grand Prize winner at Emerging Screenwriters Screenplay Competition and THE CALLING, a supernatural horror thriller.

(Lee's short films and upcoming projects are at kj-film.com)

In addition, Lee helps people facing homelessness, mental illness, and substance abuse at a transition home. (She also holds a master's in psychology from Columbia University.)

CHARLES BURNETT

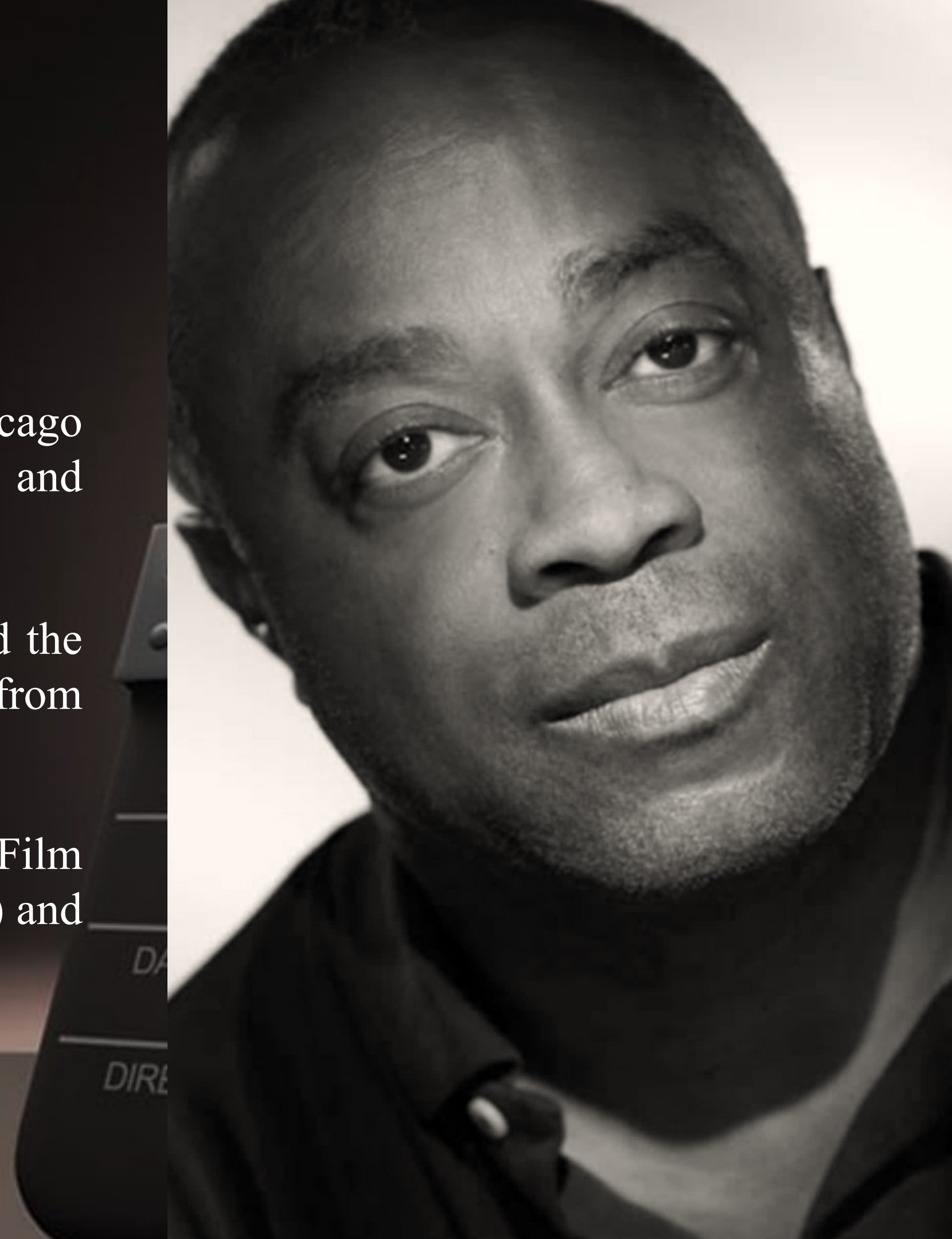
Adviser

Called "one of America's very best filmmakers" by the Chicago Tribune and "the nation's least-known great filmmaker and most gifted black director" by The New York Times.

Recipient of MacArthur Fellowship, Getty Foundation and the Guggenheim Fellowship. Received an "honorary Oscar" from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Two of his films have been selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress: *Killer of Sheep* (1978) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990).

T E A M B I O





WRITER/DIRECTOR STATEMENT

As a Korean American filmmaker, I draw upon my bicultural perspective to tell stories that explore the Asian American experience and the complex relationships between different communities. My work is inspired by real historical events, cultural traditions, and the lived experiences of people navigating identity, loss, and belonging.

I am particularly drawn to stories that blend magical realism with raw human drama, creating emotionally resonant imagery that reflects both memory and cultural heritage. Through *Kim's Money Tree*, I wanted to explore how grief, family, food, and love can bridge divides that often seem insurmountable.

Although more than thirty years have passed since the 1992 L.A. Riots, many of the issues that fueled those tensions—racial misunderstanding, economic inequality, and cultural division—remain relevant today. By telling a deeply personal father-daughter story against this historical backdrop, I hope to foster empathy and encourage greater understanding between communities whose struggles are often more connected than they appear.



CONTACT US

KYUNG-JA Lee

WRITER/DIRECTOR



ki-film.com



kjlee1659@gmail.com