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CIEP 503: Culturally Relevant Literature for Children and Adolescents

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### **Culturally Relevant Children's Book – *The Boy Called Curtis Kim***

#### **Author's Introduction**

This section is mostly for grownups. It's for the teachers who are flipping through my book and trying to figure out if it would be useful as part of a classroom lesson. It's for the parents who are trying to decide whether they should buy it as a present for their children. It's for the college professors who are trying to make sure that I learned something as I wrote it, something I can use to make me better at teaching students who come from all over the world and speak lots of different languages.

This book and the many stories it contains are based on the real life of one of my current students, a fourth grade boy who was born in the United States to Korean parents and who has autism. For those who don't know, autism is a brain disorder that makes it hard for him to relate to other people, communicate effectively and control his emotions. Out of respect for his and his family's privacy, I have changed their names and some minor personal details, but the challenges and triumphs included in this book are all drawn from my student's actual experiences.

I wrote this book because I wanted to learn more about my student and gain a better understanding of the three different worlds in which he lives. I wanted to learn more about his existence as a typical American schoolboy who speaks English, loves junk food, and collects pictures of Barack Obama. I wanted to learn more about his experience as a Korean-American who lives in a bilingual household, attends heritage language school on Saturdays, and sings along with Korean pop music. But most of all, I wanted to learn about how his third world, the world of autism, affects his communication with people no matter which language he is speaking, and affects his interactions with people no matter what the cultural undertones of the given situation. I wanted to gain groundbreaking insight into the complicated dynamic that is created when a bicultural person is also part of the culture of autism.

In an effort to learn more about a student that I already knew very well, I did a little research. I interviewed his fourth grade teacher, who is called Mrs. Taylor in this book, to find out more about his behavior in her classroom. I interviewed his mother, who is called Anna, to find out more about his family background, traditions, and home environment. And I interviewed my student, who is called Curtis in these stories, to find out more about his thoughts, feelings and experiences, especially as related to being partly Korean and partly American. I also did a little work on the internet in order to find some important cultural details and get some help with a few Korean phrases.

However, even with all that work, and with all the time and brainpower I spent on this project, I'm not sure I can say that writing this book revealed any groundbreaking insight into the complex relationship between a bilingual and bicultural lifestyle and the social constraints presented by autism. But that doesn't really matter, because writing it definitely helped me gain a better understanding of one of my most complex students. Through my research and storytelling, I learned about Curtis as a whole person,

rather than just as a challenging student on my caseload. And, because I learned *from* him while I was learning *about* him, I believe that writing this book will ultimately make me better at teaching him.

### **Here Comes Curtis**

Curtis Jeemin Kim is an American boy.

He was born in a fancy hospital just outside of Chicago, right in the middle of the United States. He has lived in the same small house in a quiet neighborhood near that hospital for his entire life. Curtis speaks only in English when he talks to his teachers and the other kids at his school, where he is in the fourth grade. He loves watching the Disney channel on his family's giant television. He will eat as many hot dogs and Skittles as he can get his hands on. He likes learning about our nation's presidents.

Curtis Jeemin Kim is a Korean boy.

Both of his parents were born in Korea. Both of them grew up there, and came to the United States as young adults because they wanted better jobs. His grandparents on his mother's side also moved from Korea. They live near Curtis and often take care of him and his younger brother, Jared. All of these adults call Curtis by his middle name, Jeemin, because it is his Korean name. All of these adults mix Korean words with English words when they talk to him. He sometimes uses Korean words when he talks to them. Every Saturday, he goes to Korean School at a church near his house to help him get better at speaking, reading and writing in his family's language. He loves watching Korean singing shows and soccer games with his father. He will eat as many bowls of rice-cake soup and sweet rice-cakes with beans as he can get his hands on. He likes learning about the history of Korea.

Curtis Jeemin Kim is a boy who has Autism.

That means his brain works in a special way. It makes some things really easy for Curtis, and it makes some things really hard for him. When he is interested, he remembers everything. He doesn't just like learning about American presidents, he knows all of the presidents in order. He doesn't just like learning about Korean history, he can write a list of all the country's biggest events, as well as the years when they happened. He knows how to use all different kinds of computers without ever reading any instructions, and he helps his parents and his teachers with computer problems they can't solve.

But Curtis has trouble looking at other people when he is talking to them, even when he likes them a lot. He has trouble using words to tell how he is feeling, even when the feelings are good. He has trouble understanding what other people are saying to him in English, even though his ears work well and he knows all of the words. He has trouble understanding what his family members are saying to him in Korean, even though he knows most of those words too.

Curtis really likes the kids in his class, and he wants to make friends with them, but he doesn't understand how to show them that. So he just asks them lots of questions. And he asks his teachers lots of questions. And he asks his parents and grandparents lots of questions. He always needs to know exactly what is coming up next.

Curtis sometimes gets scared or upset by things he can't explain, which makes bad feelings build up inside him like bubbling lava in a volcano, until he has to let it out by screaming or crying. After he calms down, he always feels bad about getting upset. He always knows what he did wrong. And he always wants to try again.

Curtis has a powerful brain, but it is sometimes hard to know what he is thinking. And Curtis has a loving heart, but it is sometimes hard to understand how he is feeling. These are his stories.

### **Curtis and his Family**

To really get to know Curtis, you need to get to know his family members. They all love him, even when they don't understand him. And he loves all of them, even if he doesn't know how to show it.

Curtis calls his father *Aba*. His real name is Kiho, but he goes by Jeff now that he lives in America. He sometimes speaks to Curtis in English and sometimes speaks in Korean. He has trouble understanding why Curtis gets upset so easily, so he doesn't spend a lot of time with his son, but they do like to watch two Korean television shows together. On Saturday mornings, Curtis and his dad watch Korean soccer matches, cheering together for their favorite players. On Sunday mornings, they watch *Na Neun Ga Soo*, a show that features famous Korean singers competing against each other until only one winner is left. Curtis and his father sing along together with all the songs they both know.

Curtis calls his mother *Umma*. Her real name is Yangsook, but she goes by Anna now that she lives in America. She sometimes speaks to Curtis in English and sometimes speaks in Korean. She worries about Curtis's future, so she makes sure he does his homework and reads books instead of playing on the computer, which means she isn't always his favorite parent and he doesn't always want her around. But when she takes long trips as part of her job as a flight attendant, Curtis misses her badly and counts the days until she comes back. His world just isn't the same without his mother.

Curtis calls his younger brother *My Brother*, because he isn't sure what else to call him. His Korean name is Eunsook, but most people call him Jared. He speaks to Curtis in English, but not very often, because the two brothers don't get along. Curtis likes the idea of being an older brother, but he never knows what to say to Jared or how to play with him, so he bullies him and argues with him instead. Jared is very different from his older brother. He isn't as good at remembering things or using computers, but he is much better at talking to other people and making friends. Some of these friends come over to Jared's house for play-dates, which makes Curtis feel lonely, so he tries to join in. It's hard for Curtis to understand that his brother's friends didn't come over to play with him.

Curtis calls his grandfather *Hal A Bugi* and he calls his grandmother *Hal Muni*. They are his mother's parents, who moved from Korea soon after she did, and they live nearby Curtis. They usually speak to Curtis in Korean, and it annoys them that he usually answers in English. It annoys them when he says, "Talk English! We are in America!" They try very hard to do nice things for Curtis, and they don't understand why these nice things sometimes make him mad. They don't understand why the smell of freshly made sushi made him lie on the ground crying. They don't understand why the sound of Korean opera made him run away screaming. They try their very best to love their grandson, but they aren't always sure how to love a boy like Curtis.

### **Curtis has Special Helpers**

The grownups in his family love Curtis with all their hearts, but there are many other adults who care about him too. Some of these adults are different kinds of teachers who help him learn when he is at school. Some of them are different kinds of doctors who help him learn about his feelings when he

visits their offices. All of them know how smart and talented Curtis is, but they also know he needs to get better at understanding other people's good ideas and sharing his good ideas with other people.

Mrs. Taylor is Curtis's fourth grade teacher. She does her best to teach him important lessons in all different subjects. She loves having him in her class because he has a good heart and always wants to help her with classroom jobs, but she feels sad and helpless when he loses his temper or refuses to speak and she doesn't know why.

Mr. Daniel is Curtis's special education teacher. He helps Curtis get better at writing down his thoughts so that other people can understand them. He also helps Curtis learn rules for talking to people and making friends. He loves working with Curtis because he discovers new things he's good at every day, but he worries that his student feels lonely and doesn't know how to change that.

Mr. Kelly, the social worker, helps Curtis practice sharing his feelings. Miss Nelson, the speech teacher, helps him practice explaining his ideas. Miss Novack, the motor-skills teacher, helps him practice writing his ideas in perfect cursive. And Dr. Keef, his therapist, helps him practice skills he will need to solve big problems that happen at home and at school.

With so many caring adults trying to get Curtis to practice doing things that are very hard for him, is it any surprise that he sometimes ignores them? Is it any surprise that he sometimes decides not to talk to them, or pretends that he doesn't understand them? Wouldn't you?

### **Curtis and the Lunar New Year**

Curtis sat in the car, with a pouting look on his face, as he watched his little brother Jared hugging his grandparents and waving the money they had just given him in the air. He didn't really care about the hugs, but he wanted his own money to wave. All he had to do was bow and say a few simple words in Korean to his grandmother and grandfather, and the money would be his. Curtis knew the words and could say them correctly, but he was afraid to make them come out of his mouth when he was standing in front of his grandparents. He didn't know why it was so scary, but he knew that it was.

It was *Seol-nal*, the first day of the Lunar New Year. On this day, Korean people usually visit the older members of their family to show respect and offer best wishes for the future. Children are expected to bow and give a special greeting to their elders, and their elders are expected to give them a gift of money in return. Curtis, his parents and Jared had made the ten-minute drive to his grandparents' house in order to follow this tradition. For days before, Curtis had practiced the words he had to say. He knew them backwards and forwards. But as soon as the car pulled into the driveway, those words felt frozen inside his mouth. And his body felt frozen to the seat.

His parents begged. And his parents yelled. But Curtis wouldn't move from his spot in the car and wouldn't tell them why. They sent his grandparents to talk to him in kind, quiet voices, but he couldn't make himself do it, not even for them. All of the adults shook their heads and walked towards the house, telling Jared that he would have to do the greeting alone. So Jared did. And Jared got paid. And Curtis watched his little brother jealously, fighting a war inside himself.

After taking a few photographs of Jared with his grandparents, Curtis's parents said good bye and walked back towards the car. "Too bad Curtis had a bad day," his mom said to his dad, "he could have used the money to buy that zookeeper video game he is always begging for."

Her words flipped a light switch in Curtis's head. All of a sudden, he was no longer thinking about how hard it would be to face his grandparents. He was only thinking about playing a game that would make him feel like he was really taking care of lions, elephants and giraffes. He burst out of the car and raced to his grandparents' front door, where they stood with their mouths hanging open.

*"Hal A Bugi,"* said Curtis in a shy voice, bowing to his grandfather. *"Hal Muni,"* he said, bowing to his grandmother. *"Sa Hae Bok Mani Badup Saiyo,"* he said quickly but correctly.

"And a 'Happy and Prosperous New Year' to you too, Jeemin," said his grandpa, with a smile on his face. He reached into his pocket, pulled out two bills and handed them to Curtis, who grabbed them and ran back to his parents' car without looking back.

"Now, was that so hard for you?" his mother asked Curtis as he put on his seat belt.

"It was so hard for me," he said, "but now I get to be a zookeeper."

### **Curtis at Brookfield Zoo**

It was the field trip Curtis had waited his whole life for. Or at least it felt that way as he rode the school bus with Mrs. Taylor and the rest of his class, heading to Brookfield Zoo. He loved learning about animals and wanted to be a zookeeper someday. He also wanted to ask a real zookeeper about everything they did as part of their job. He could feel the excitement building inside him, pushing against the inside of his head. He thought of a list of questions for the zookeeper, and practiced them until he knew them by heart. He smiled and smacked his hands together, making loud clapping noises over and over until a classmate complained and Mrs. Taylor sat down next to him.

"Curtis, please stop that clapping. I understand you are excited about the zoo, but can you please try to show it quietly?" his teacher asked Curtis in a soft voice. He really liked Mrs. T, so he forced his hands to be quiet until she turned to go back to her seat. Then he clapped loudly a few more times.

"It looks like you should be in my group today, Curtis," she said, returning to her spot by his side, where she stayed until the school bus turned into the Brookfield Zoo parking lot.

After Mrs. Taylor split all of the kids into groups and set them up with parent helpers, she collected the students in her group, including Curtis. "Follow me," she called to them. "What animal do you want to find first, guys?"

"Where is the zookeeper?!" Curtis shouted in an angry voice. He sounded like he had been cheated out of something. "Where is the zookeeper that will show us animals and answer all my questions?!" His voice got louder and his face turned a dark red color. The other kids stepped away from him, looking serious and scared.

"There is no zookeeper, Curtis," Mrs. Taylor replied in a careful tone. "We have to lead our own tour and try to answer questions ourselves."

"Noooooo!! That isn't how I planned it in my head!" shouted Curtis. "That is against my rules!" He fell to the ground and started kicking his legs. He rolled around and cried like someone was hurting him. The field trip of his dreams had turned into a nightmare. The other kids didn't laugh at him. They knew

how it felt to have important plans ruined by adult decisions. They felt bad for Curtis, but they didn't know what to say or do to help him. But Mrs. Taylor did.

"Curtis, I know you are upset because we don't have a zookeeper to help us," she whispered, bending down next to his thrashing body, "but that just means we need someone else to teach us about the animals. You know so much about so many animals. Can you please be our substitute zookeeper and tour guide?" she asked, with sugar in her voice.

Instantly, Curtis stopped crying and made his body still. He picked himself up and dusted himself off. He did his best to smile at his teacher and classmates.

"Can we go see the monkeys and gorillas first?" he asked, his words quick and happy. "Did you know they are the species of animals most closely related to humans? Did you know that Silverback gorillas live in families just like people? Did you know that I'm going to be a zookeeper someday?"

### **Curtis has a Lunch Date**

Curtis laughed out loud as he put a sticker in the final spot on his behavior chart. The chart was hanging in Mr. Daniel's classroom, and the sticker meant that Curtis had earned a special lunch from a fast food restaurant of his choice for him and a friend of his choice.

The food part was easy. Curtis wanted a chili cheese dog and cheese fries and a chocolate milkshake from Portillo's, a hot dog stand near his school. Truth be told, he wanted more food than that, but Mr. Daniel said it wasn't important not to be greedy.

The friend part was the part that made him nervous. It wasn't that Curtis didn't know which friend to invite. He had already picked out Meghan, a girl in his class who also liked animals and computers. What made him nervous was actually talking to her, inviting her, using words to ask her if she wanted to eat lunch with him. So he looked around for help.

"Mr. Daniel? Did I earn my large prize?" said Curtis, without really meaning it as a question.

"Did you? Looks like it! Good work, boss!" his teacher replied.

"I'm your boss?" said Curtis, feeling quite confused.

"Sorry, just an expression," said Mr. Daniel. "I'm guessing we are getting food from Portillo's, since that's all you've been talking about for the past two weeks." He smiled down at Curtis, who didn't respond for several moments.

"Can you invite Meghan from my class?" Curtis said suddenly. "If I say please will you do it for me?" His eyes were wide and hopeful.

"Sorry buddy, I know it's hard for you, but part of having your friend eat with us is you being brave enough to invite her yourself," said Mr. Daniel in a soft voice. "But I can help you figure out exactly what to say. Let's get started."

Curtis and Mr. Daniel talked about the words he should use to invite Meghan to lunch. Then they wrote those words down on a piece of paper and Curtis practiced saying them again and again until he was sure that he knew them. Finally, he felt ready to try them out for real.

With Mr. Daniel close behind him, Curtis walked downstairs to Mrs. Taylor's classroom, where Meghan would be waiting. His heart beat fast. His stomach felt tight. His hands felt wet and sticky. He felt like turning around and running back to Mr. Daniel's room, but he made himself keep going forward.

Before he knew it, Curtis was standing next to Meghan's desk. "Meghan?" he said in a shaky voice. She looked up at him and smiled. "Meghan?" he repeated. Then, because it was way too late to turn back, he raced ahead. "Would you want to have Portillo's lunch with me and with Mr. Daniel tomorrow? Would that be okay for you?" he finished, seemingly stunned by his own courage.

"That would be awesome for me!" Meghan replied without hesitation, giving Curtis a high-five.

Curtis was filled with a relaxing happiness for most of the rest of the day. He felt proud of himself. He felt brave and bold. He felt like the hardest moment of his life was behind him. He simply couldn't wait to eat chili dogs with Meghan. But then, without warning, a new fear took hold of him. A new worry came into his mind and wouldn't leave him alone. A new problem arose that he needed to solve.

What in the world would he talk about with Meghan during lunch?

### **Curtis at Korean School**

While the rest of the class watched Curtis to see how he would respond to the teacher's direction, he sat totally still and thought about how much he hated coming to *Ha Sang*, the Korean-language school that he had gone to every Saturday since he was in kindergarten. He thought about how much he hated the 19 other fourth-grade students, who bullied him in quiet voices and then told the teachers when he answered in an angry voice. He thought about how much he hated his teachers, who only spoke to him in Korean and used loud voices when he felt upset and wanted them to speak softly. He thought about how much he hated the strange tile floors and odd-smelling air at *Ha Sang*.

But most of all, Curtis thought about how much he hated speaking in Korean in front of his teacher and the kids in his class. It wasn't because he didn't know the language. He knew the entire Korean alphabet and all of the Korean vowels by heart. He could read the language without much trouble, and could write in the language without much help. Curtis even knew how to speak in Korean. He just didn't know how to do it when the whole class was watching.

"Jeemin! *Dang shin eui hoi jun ha da!*" his teacher said in an angry voice, repeating her earlier direction and reminding Curtis that it was his turn to give a speech to the class.

"*Ah ni yo, sung seng nim,*" Curtis replied, politely informing her that he was never going to make that speech, no matter what she did. He had written his speech, titled *Ho Lang Yi*, about his favorite animal, the tiger. He had checked his speech until he knew it was perfect. He had even practiced it for his father. But there was no way he was giving that speech in front of the class.

His teacher ordered him to do it, speaking in Korean. Then she ordered him to do it, speaking in English. But Curtis did not budge. His teacher threatened to tell his mother, speaking in Korean. Then she threatened to tell his mother, speaking in English. But still, Curtis did not budge. His teacher told him that he would be kicked out of the school, speaking in Korean. Then she told him that he would be kicked out of the school, speaking in English. And still, Curtis did not budge. He just sat at his desk, silently staring back at her until she finally gave up and left him alone.

Later, during the car ride home, Curtis performed his *Ho Lang Yi* speech for his mom and his brother without even being asked. And he said every word perfectly.

### **Curtis on Halloween**

The entire school was buzzing with excitement as Halloween got closer, including all of the other kids in Curtis's class. They simply could not wait. For them, it was one of the best days of the year. They loved dressing up in scary or funny costumes and marching around the school in the Halloween parade. They loved it when their principal played spooky music over the loudspeaker and when their teachers wore witch hats or clown wigs. They loved eating candy and playing games in the same classrooms where they usually read books and took tests.

But Curtis hated Halloween. It was a day when everything was so different at school that it made him feel nervous, or worse. It scared him when the other kids wore masks or makeup, because he couldn't always figure out who they really were. It bothered him when the principal played creepy tunes, because the music was too loud and he didn't know the words. He didn't want his favorite teachers to stop wearing their usual sweaters and slacks, and to start wearing costumes that made them look like cowboys or queens. He didn't want his classroom to be filled with orange and black decorations, noisy games that he didn't understand, and unknown parent helpers.

The night before Halloween, Curtis decided that he wasn't going to school the next day.

"*Umma!*" he called to his mother, shouting across the house. He sat on the couch in the television room and kept yelling out her Korean name until she finally left the kitchen and came to find him.

"Jeemin, you can't just yell in the house like that," his mother patiently explained. "If you do that, it seems like there is a big emergency. If you want to talk to me, you have to come to where I am."

"It is a big emergency!" Curtis answered in a loud, angry voice. "I can't go to school tomorrow! Why do I have to?! It's the worst day of my life! Why do I have to do things I hate?! Please let me stay home! May I please?!" His eyes filled with tears as he begged his mother.

His mother sighed, smiled and tried to gently rub his hair. Curtis twisted away from her hand. She tried to touch his shoulder. He ducked away. "Jeemin, I know you don't like Halloween, but you can't miss school unless you are really sick. I could never miss school when I was a girl in Korea, so you can't either," she said in a tired voice.

"This is America. We don't live in Korea," Curtis said, in a low, growling voice.

"And American boys go to school on Halloween. And dress up. And have parties with the other kids," his mother replied, and walked out of the room, leaving Curtis to cry alone.

When Curtis stepped off the bus the next day, he was already feeling scared. He didn't even want to go inside the school. But Mr. Daniel met him at the door and talked to him in a quiet voice that made him feel a little bit better. Finally, he agreed to go to Mr. D's classroom and make a plan for the rest of the day. When they got there, it turned out that Curtis's plan was very different from his teacher's plan.

Curtis wanted to stay in Mr. Daniel's classroom for the whole day, so he would be safe. Mr. Daniel wanted Curtis to be part of the Halloween parade and his class party, because it would be fun once he

realized that there was really nothing to be scared of. He told Curtis that he would stay with him every step of the way. Curtis did not like this plan, but he still said yes because nothing felt better than spending time with Mr. D, and nothing felt worse than letting him down.

As the Halloween parade started, Curtis held tightly to Mr. Daniel's hand. Curtis was dressed in his *Taekwondo* uniform, which felt strange because he had stopped taking classes one month earlier when the *kyosanim* told his mom that he was too difficult to work with. Mr. Daniel was dressed in fuzzy pajamas that made him look like a tiger. Even though Curtis wasn't happy that his teacher looked so different, he was glad that he could still see Mr. D's eyes.

"Remember, CK," Mr. Daniel said, using a nickname that made Curtis feel cool, "if you see any dressed-up kids that scare you, you can just close your eyes or look down at the ground. But if you are feeling extra brave, you can remember that they are just kids like you and look right at them. I will be proud of you either way," he finished, squeezing Curtis's hand.

"I can hate it, but I can still try my best?" Curtis asked his teacher, who nodded.

So Curtis tried his best to be brave. And he made it through the entire Halloween parade, only closing his eyes two or three times. And he listened to most of the spooky songs the principal played over the loudspeaker, only plugging his ears two or three times. And he stayed in his classroom for most of the party, only taking a break in the hallway two or three times.

That night, safe at home, he told his mom it was the best Halloween ever. And he meant it.

### **Curtis in Korea**

When Curtis woke up in a pitch black room in the middle of the night, he didn't know where he was. What bed was this? What room? Why was he wide awake so late at night? He didn't like these questions at all. He felt like screaming at the top of his lungs and got ready to do just that, but he stopped himself as his memory suddenly returned and he recognized his situation.

He was on vacation with his father in Seoul, Korea. They were staying at his aunt Gisook's house, where his cousin Yung Son and his other grandfather also lived. And he was wide awake in the middle of the night because of jet lag, which Curtis had just learned about from his dad during their long plane flight. Jet lag meant that his body still thought it was in America, even though it was really in Korea.

Then he realized that, no matter where his body thought it was, it really needed to use the bath room. But where was the bathroom? Curtis wasn't sure. He started to feel nervous, and he didn't like it. He wondered if screaming would solve the problem, but once again he stopped himself with a better idea, deciding to ask an adult. Feeling hopeful, he stepped out of the bedroom to find one. He reminded himself that he wasn't allowed to wake up adults who were sleeping. Happily for Curtis, there was still one adult awake. Unhappily for Curtis, it was the one who scared him most, his grandfather.

Curtis was afraid of his grandfather because the old man was sick, with a cough that never went away. He was afraid of his grandfather because the old man had spots on his hands and thin, wrinkled skin on his arms. And he was afraid of his grandfather because the old man barely spoke English and always talked so quickly in Korean that Curtis struggled to keep up.

But Curtis really had to go. It was becoming a problem. So he forced himself to walk into his grandfather's room, where the light was on and the old man was reading.

"*Hal A Bugi*, where is the bathroom?" asked Curtis in a shaky voice. The old man didn't reply.

"*Hal A Bugi*, where is the bathroom?" he tried again, getting a little louder. The old man smiled and mumbled something in Korean that Curtis didn't understand. Curtis felt heat rising inside of him, and made himself think. English wasn't working. He would have to figure it out in Korean. He concentrated for a moment, going back to his *Ha Sang* classroom in his mind.

"*Hal A Bugi*, *mok yok tang?*" Curtis tried timidly.

His grandfather broke into a huge smile. He took Curtis out into the hallway and pointed to a door at the very end of it. "*Ju gi eh*," he said, and pointed again. Curtis nodded and headed that way, his confidence soaring and his grandfather suddenly seeming a lot less scary.

Because he was busy feeling proud of himself, the pain of his bare feet on the bathroom's wet tile floor caught Curtis completely by surprise. His aunt, following Korean custom, had sprayed down the bathroom with cold water just before bedtime and there were still little wet drops all over the floor, drops that felt like nails digging into Curtis's feet. He stood frozen, his feet glued to the very same floor that was hurting them. And then a small wet spot appeared in the front of his pajama pants.

Curtis had stopped himself from screaming before, but there was no stopping him now. He screamed until his throat hurt. He screamed until his lungs hurt. He screamed until his ears hurt. And he screamed until his father raced into the bathroom, picked him up, carried him to his bedroom, changed his pants and tucked him under the covers. Finally, Curtis fell silent.

As his father left the room, he turned back to Curtis. "Next time, Jeemin, please just wear your slippers," he said with a sad smile.

The next day, to help Curtis feel better about the problems from the night before, his aunt Gisook offered to take him and his cousin to any restaurant in Seoul. They would go anywhere he chose, no matter how fancy or expensive. Curtis didn't have to think long. He knew exactly where he wanted to eat. And it was the best visit to Pizza Hut that Curtis has ever had.

### **Curtis at the Art Institute**

Curtis knew he shouldn't touch the painting. He knew it wasn't allowed, but he just couldn't help it. His brain was telling him not to do it, but an invisible rope seemed to be pulling his hands.

He had kept those same hands under control for most of the fourth-grade's field trip to the Art Institute, mostly because Mr. Daniel, who was leading his group, had kept reminding him about the rules for being in a museum.

"Look with your eyes. Ask questions with your mouth. Listen with your ears. Learn with your brain. But please don't touch with your hands," Mr. Daniel had told Curtis and the other kids before they entered each new room. But now Mr. D was waiting for students who were using the bathroom and Curtis was standing by himself.

Curtis watched his own hands leave the pockets of his sweatshirt and start to move in the direction of the painting. It was a great painting, showing stacks of hay in bright colors. He noticed that the little card next to it named Claude Monet as the artist. He wondered if Claude Monet would be mad if he touched the painting. He wondered how mad Mr. Daniel would get if he touched the painting. While he wondered, Curtis moved his hands closer and closer to the painting. He ignored the alarm in his head.

Then, suddenly, a real alarm began to sound. It was so loud that Curtis plugged his ears with his fingers and began to cry. It was so loud that everyone in that part of the museum, including Mr. Daniel and the other kids, turned to stare at him. It was so loud that two guards wearing matching red jackets walked over to check out the situation. Curtis began to scream and, when one of the guards tried to put her hands on his shoulders to calm him down, he screamed even louder.

Curtis stayed upset for a long time. He was upset when Mr. Daniel picked him up and carried him away from the painting. He was upset when Mr. Daniel led him through the Art Institute and took him outside. He was upset when Mr. D made him sit on the bus and take deep breaths until everyone else finished the tour. But he finally calmed down and found that he could use his brain again. So he did some thinking. He thought carefully about what had happened that day. In fact, he thought about it during the entire bus ride back to school, ignoring everything else around him.

When the bus ride was over, Curtis stood up to leave with the rest of the kids, but he stopped and turned back to look at Mr. Daniel. It was hard for him to look at his teacher's eyes, so he stared at his teacher's shoulder instead. He wanted to be brave and share exactly how sorry he felt.

"Mr. Daniel," Curtis said slowly, looking for the right words, "I understand why there are rules now."

### **About the Author**

Owen Douglas is fiercely proud to have taught special needs students at Devonshire School in Skokie, Illinois for the past six years. As part of this job, he has worked with lots of amazing kids who learn in many different ways, come from many different cultures, and are familiar with many different languages. In an effort to better understand complicated students like these, Owen has added graduate school night-classes to his ongoing teaching responsibilities. He is currently attending Loyola University Chicago in the hopes of becoming certified to teach students who are still learning to use English, and it is his participation in this program that led him to try writing this book, which is clearly his first.

