

Behind the Book | *Searching for Sylvie Lee* by Jean Kwok

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When we moved from Hong Kong to Brooklyn, New York, my older brother Kwan and I lost our parents—not to death but to immigration—and so we meant more to each other than ever. Our Ma and Pa had transformed, now more lost and confused than we were, and as the youngest of seven siblings, quicker to learn English than our elders, Kwan and I were charged with guiding our parents through a complex new culture and language we could barely navigate ourselves.

There are few photos of us from that time because we could not afford a camera, but one stands out in my memory. I was five years old, toothless and exuberant, sitting at fifteen-year-old Kwan's feet with a bowl of rice and chopsticks in my hands. I would not learn to use a knife and fork until I was a teenager. At the time, I was unaware of the gaping plaster falling from the ceiling beyond the scope of the picture, or the rats lurking within the walls. I did not know that when the painful, bitter winter arrived—so much colder than anything imaginable in tropical Hong Kong—that the windows would be covered with a layer of ice inside because we did not have central heating. Already growing into a handsome man, Kwan's expression was thoughtful, one hand resting protectively on my shoulder. He had already started working at the clothing factory in Chinatown after school.



Jean with Kwan

I, too, would soon take the subway to that sweatshop with Pa to help the family as much as I could. Hours later, covered with sweat and fabric dust, Ma and Pa would take me home as Kwan and my other brothers went on to their second jobs waiting tables until deep into the night. In the morning, we would stumble to school, having done our homework on the subway or during breaks at the factory, and begin our long days all over again.

Kwan was, however, brilliant. He painstakingly crafted a way out of that cycle of grime and exhaustion, and in so doing, led the way for my escape as well. One night, I woke upon the mattress on the floor where I slept. Kwan had returned from his restaurant job and laid a small, wrapped brown package next to me. It was a present. We were paid one cent per garment at the factory, so I did not receive many gifts. To this day, I am amazed that he did not give me a toy or a piece of candy, but something that would change my life. It was a blank diary and he said, “Whatever you write in this, will belong to you.”

From that moment on, I began to write: about my confusion in this country, my loneliness as an awkward, homely Chinese girl amidst my Nike-wearing, fork-wielding classmates—and, after Kwan was accepted into MIT and left for college, about how much I missed him. He had blasted out of our public school system and taken his rightful place as a glittering star in the sky.

I lived for the moments when his orbit brought him home, always bringing me gifts—thick red MIT sweatshirts, books about Einstein and quantum theory, a computer to take the place of the manual typewriter I used, contact lenses to replace the thick glasses I desperately needed but never wore out of vanity.

Then, in November of 2009, Kwan disappeared. I had moved to the Netherlands to be with the man who would become my husband and received a panicked phone call from my family. Kwan had not come home for Thanksgiving. He was the most responsible person we knew. An invisible hand clutched my heart. Something must be wrong.

I quickly took over the search, contacting his work and friends, and discovered he had gone to Texas to purchase a small plane. Flying was his passion and he had clocked more than 1,600 hours of flight experience. I hacked into his email and finally found the right airport. Kwan had taken off . . . then the plane had vanished.

I pictured my brother with a broken leg, dying of thirst beside his plane. I broke down, sobbing to strangers, the police, politicians, cell and credit card companies, the FAA, anyone who might help us find him. We narrowed the search area to a hundred-square-mile expanse of mountains. My family raced there, driving around aimlessly, calling his name into the woods. A week after Kwan disappeared, the Air Force and search-and-rescue teams found his body. His plane had nicked a tree and he had died upon impact.

Searching for Sylvie Lee was born from my love for my tragic, brilliant brother. Even though I know he is gone, my heart will never stop searching for him.

—Jean Kwok, Author