

## AMY TAN

Author of THE JOY LUCK CLUB

# HUNDRED SECRET SENSES





Amy Tan

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## "POWERFUL . . . ENGROSSING . . . [AN] EFFORTLESS MIX OF INVENTION."

### —Chicago Tribune

"Kwan, in particular, is a memorable creation. . . . She emerges as a character at once innocent and wise, the relative Olivia both suffers and relies upon. Kwan gently forces Olivia to face the worst in herself and, in so doing, to find her strengths. We could all do with such a sister."

—The New York Times Book Review

"The power of Tan's writing lies in the revelations of the missteps between the heart and mind. . . . Ultimately, in its resolution, THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES is about hope. And so it seems right that the secret senses of which Tan writes should roam this earthly world and beyond. Some emotions do not die, certainly not the enduring love of the fictional characters this inspiring author creates."

#### —The Toronto Globe & Mail

"Compelling . . . Tan is a wonderful writer, a master at dialogue and description. In Kwan, she's created a woman so vivid, you can almost see her badly permed hair, hear her raspy voice, smell the garlic on her hands."

—The Hartford Courant

Please turn the page for more wonderful reviews . . .

### "FUNNY, ENTERTAINING, AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING." —Houston Chronicle

"The energy of Amy Tan's new novel comes, as in her previous books, from the tension between two worlds—the old-country world of China: arranged marriages, back-country villages, the tyranny of family ties, numbing poverty; and the new world of daily life in the United States: malls, suburbs, relationship chit-chat, vague angst in the midst of middle-class comfort. These two worlds are not harmonious and throw off great sparks when they are rubbed together. . . . Kwan is a great raconteur, a great talker, a great fictional invention. She has no opinions, only stories."

-San Jose Mercury News

"[Tan] uses heart talk to come up with delightful, intriguing, meaningful insights, proving that love somehow survives everything, even time."

-The Kansas City Star

"Tan brings the Chinese countryside to life with colorful landscapes, folk tales, and the tastes and smells of rural China."

--The San Diego Tribune

### "POWERFUL . . .

THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES is a very mystic book, a moving and disturbing journey that makes us realize the truth of existence must be something much different than we believe it to be. But it is also a journey of hope, an affirmation that life is significant."

-Statesman-Journal

"Resonates with Tan's distinctive, lyrical voice."
—St. Petersburg Times

"Fascinating . . . Combines all the elements of a ghost story, a love story, and an adventure story."

-Asian Wall Street Journal

"A richly layered tale of love, fate, and magic, marked, as always, by Tan's storytelling ability and enchanting prose."

--Colorado Daily

"No one will deny the pleasure of Tan's seductive prose and the skill with which she unfolds the many-layered narrative."

-Publishers Weekly (starred review)

By Amy Tan:

THE JOY LUCK CLUB\*
THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE\*
THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES\*

For Children: THE MOON LADY THE CHINESE SIAMESE CAT

\*Published by Ivy Books

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#### FOR FAITH



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### I •

### THE GIRL WITH YIN EYES

My sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes. She sees those who have died and now dwell in the World of Yin, ghosts who leave the mists just to visit her kitchen on Balboa Street in San Francisco.

"Libby-ah," she'll say to me. "Guess who I see yesterday, you guess." And I don't have to guess that she's talking about someone dead.

Actually, Kwan is my half sister, but I'm not supposed to mention that publicly. That would be an insult, as if she deserved only fifty percent of the love from our family. But just to set the genetic record straight, Kwan and I share a father, only that. She was born in China. My brothers, Kevin and Tommy, and I were born in San Francisco after my father, Jack Yee, immigrated here and married our mother, Louise Kenfield.

Mom calls herself "American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried." She was born in Moscow, Idaho, where she was a champion baton twirler and once won a county fair prize for growing a deformed potato that had the profile of Jimmy Durante. She told me she dreamed she'd one day grow up to be different—thin, exotic, and noble like Luise Rainer, who won an Oscar playing O-lan in *The Good Earth*. When Mom moved to San Francisco and became a Kelly girl instead,

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she did the next-best thing. She married our father. Mom thinks that her marrying out of the Anglo race makes her a liberal. "When Jack and I met," she still tells people, "there were laws against mixed marriages. We broke the law for love." She neglects to mention that those laws didn't apply in California.

None of us, including my mom, met Kwan until she was eighteen. In fact, Mom didn't even know Kwan existed until shortly before my father died of renal failure. I was not quite four when he passed away. But I still remember moments with him. Falling down a curly slide into his arms. Dredging the wading pool for pennies he had tossed in. And the last day I saw him in the hospital, hearing what he said that scared me for years.

Kevin, who was five, was there. Tommy was just a baby, so he was in the waiting room with my mom's cousin, Betty Dupree-we had to call her Aunt Bettywho had moved out from Idaho as well. I was sitting on a sticky vinyl chair, eating a bowl of strawberry Jell-O cubes that my father had given me from his lunch tray. He was propped up in bed, breathing hard. Mom would cry one minute, then act cheerful. I tried to figure out what was wrong. The next thing I remember, my father was whispering and Mom leaned in close to listen. Her mouth opened wider and wider. Then her head turned sharply toward me, all twisted with horror. And I was terror-struck. How did he know? How did Daddy find out I flushed my turtles, Slowpoke and Fastpoke, down the toilet that morning? I had wanted to see what they looked like without their coats on, and ended up pulling off their heads.

"Your daughter?" I heard my mom say. "Bring her back?" And I was sure that he had just told her to bring me to the pound, which is what he did to our dog Buttons after she chewed up the sofa. What I recall after that is a

jumble: the bowl of Jell-O crashing to the floor, Mom staring at a photo, Kevin grabbing it and laughing, then me seeing this tiny black-and-white snapshot of a skinny baby with patchy hair. At some point, I heard my mother shouting: "Olivia, don't argue, you have to leave now." And I was crying, "But I'll be good."

Soon after that, my mother announced: "Daddy's left us." She also told us she was going to bring Daddy's other little girl from China to live in our house. She didn't say she was sending me to the pound, but I still cried, believing everything was vaguely connected—the headless turtles whirling down the toilet, my father abandoning us, the other girl who was coming soon to take my place. I was scared of Kwan before I ever met her.

When I was ten, I learned that my father's kidneys had killed him. Mom said he was born with four instead of the usual two, and all of them were defective. Aunt Betty had a theory about why this happened. She always had a theory, usually obtained from a source like the Weekly World News. She said he was supposed to be a Siamese twin. But in the womb, my father, the stronger twin, gobbled up the weaker one and grafted on the two extra kidneys. "Maybe he also had two hearts, two stomachs; who knows." Aunt Betty came up with this scenario around the time that Life magazine ran a pictorial about Siamese twins from Russia. I saw the same story: two girls, Tasha and Sasha, conjoined at the hip, too heartbreakingly beautiful to be freaks of nature. This must have been in the mid-sixties, around the time I learned fractions. I remember wishing we could exchange Kwan for those Siamese twins. Then I'd have two half sisters. which equaled a whole, and I figured all the kids on the block would try to be our friends, hoping we'd let them watch as we jumped rope or played hopscotch.

Aunt Betty also passed along the story of Kwan's

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birth, which was not heartbreaking, just embarrassing. During the war, she said, my father had been a university student in Guilin. He used to buy live frogs for his supper at the outdoor market from a young woman named Li Chen. He later married her, and in 1944 she gave birth to their daughter, the skinny baby in the picture, Kwan.

Aunt Betty had a theory about the marriage as well. "Your dad was good-looking, for a Chinese man. He was college-educated. And he spoke English like me and your mom. Now why would he marry a little peasant girl? Because he *had to*, that's why." By then, I was old enough to know what *had to* meant.

Whatever the case, in 1948, my father's first wife died of a lung disease, perhaps TB. My father went to Hong Kong to search for work. He left Kwan in the care of his wife's younger sister, Li Bin-bin, who lived in a small mountain village called Changmian. Of course, he sent money for their support—what father would not? But in 1949, the Communists took over China, and it was impossible for my father to return for his five-year-old daughter. So what else could he do? With a heavy heart, he left for America to start a new life and forget about the sadness he left behind. Eleven years later, while he was dying in the hospital, the ghost of his first wife appeared at the foot of his bed. "Claim back your daughter," she warned, "or suffer the consequences after death!" That's the story my father gave just before he died—that is, as told by Aunt Betty years later.

Looking back, I can imagine how my mom must have felt when she first heard this. Another wife? A daughter in China? We were a modern American family. We spoke English. Sure, we ate Chinese food, but take-out, like everyone else. And we lived in a ranch-style house in Daly City. My father worked for the Government Accounting Office. My mother went to PTA meetings. She

had never heard my father talk about Chinese superstitions before; they attended church and bought life insurance instead.

After my father died, my mother kept telling everyone how he had treated her "just like a Chinese empress." She made all sorts of grief-stricken promises to God and my father's grave. According to Aunt Betty, at the funeral, my mother vowed never to remarry. She vowed to teach us children to do honor to the Yee family name. She vowed to find my father's firstborn child, Kwan, and bring her to the United States.

The last promise was the only one she kept.

My mother has always suffered from a kind heart, compounded by seasonal rashes of volunteerism. One summer, she was a foster mother for Yorkie Rescue; the house still stinks of dog pee. For two Christmases, she dished out food to the homeless at St. Anthony's Dining Room; now she goes away to Hawaii with whoever is her current boyfriend. She's circulated petitions, done fundraising, served on boards of alternative-health groups. While her enthusiasm is genuine, eventually, always, it runs out and then she's on to something new. I suspect she thought of Kwan as a foreign exchange student she would host for a year, a Chinese Cinderella, who would become self-sufficient and go on to have a wonderful American life.

During the time before Kwan came, Mom was a cheer-leader, rallying my brothers and me to welcome a big sister into our lives. Tommy was too little to do anything except nod whenever Mom said, "Aren't you excited about having another big sister?" Kevin just shrugged and acted bored. I was the only one who did jumping jacks like a gung-ho recruit, in part because I was ecstatic to learn Kwan would be *in addition* to me, not *instead of*.

Although I was a lonely kid, I would have preferred a new turtle or even a doll, not someone who would compete for my mother's already divided attention and force me to share the meager souvenirs of her love. In recalling this, I know that my mother loved me-but not absolutely. When I compared the amount of time she spent with others—even total strangers—I felt myself sliding further down the ranks of favorites, getting bumped and bruised. She always had plenty of room in her life for dates with men or lunch with her so-called gal pals. With me, she was unreliable. Promises to take me to the movies or the public pool were easily erased with excuses or forgetfulness, or worse, sneaky variations of what was said and what was meant: "I hate it when you pout, Olivia," she once told me. "I didn't guarantee I'd go to the swim club with you. I said I would like to." How could I argue my need against her intention?

I learned to make things not matter, to put a seal on my hopes and place them on a high shelf, out of reach. And by telling myself that there was nothing inside those hopes anyway, I avoided the wounds of deep disappointment. The pain was no worse than the quick sting of a booster shot. And yet thinking about this makes me ache again. How is it that as a child I knew I should have been loved more? Is everyone born with a bottomless emotional reservoir?

So of course, I didn't want Kwan as my sister. Just the opposite. Which is why I made great efforts in front of my mother to appear enthusiastic. It was a distorted form of inverse logic: If hopes never come true, then hope for what you don't want.

Mom had said that a big sister was a bigger version of myself, sweet and beautiful, only more Chinese, and able to help me do all kinds of fun things. So I imagined not a sister but another me, an older self who danced and wore