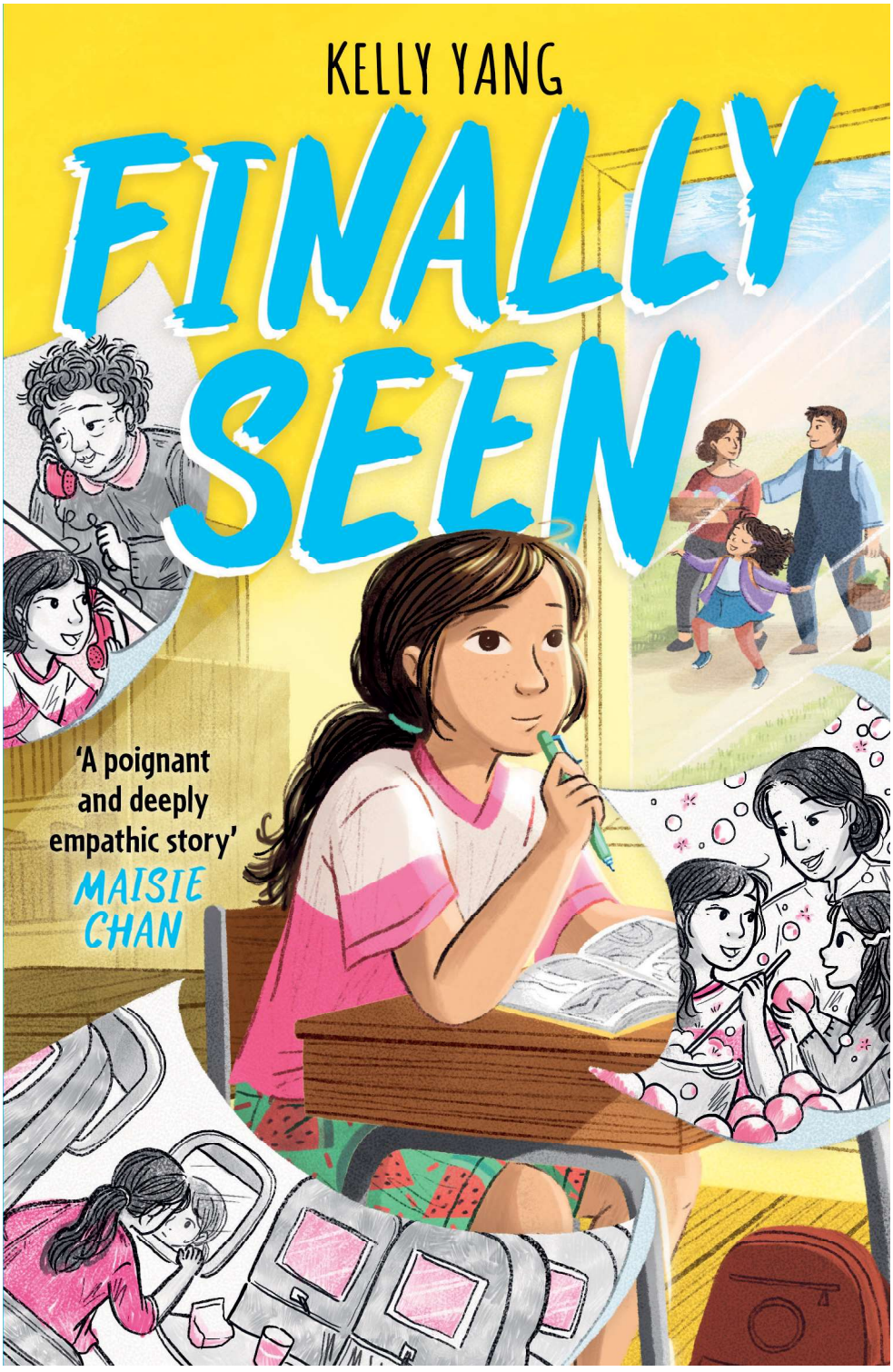

KELLY YANG
FINALLY SEEN
'A poignant and deeply empathic story'
MAISIE CHAN



Published by Knights Of
Knights Of Ltd, Registered Offices:
119 Marylebone Road, London, NW1 5PU

www.knightsof.media
Published in the UK, 2023
First published in the US by Simon & Schuster, 2023
001

Written by Kelly Yang
Text and cover copyright © Kelly Yang, 2023
Cover art by © Natelle Quek, 2023
All rights reserved
The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Set in Adobe Garamond Pro
Typeset design by Sophie McDonnell
Typeset by Sophie McDonnell
Printed and bound in the UK

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers. If you are reading this, thank you for buying our book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book will be available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781913311872



FINALLY SEEN

KELLY YANG

KO
KNIGHTS OF

Also by Kelly Yang

Front Desk
Three Keys (Front Desk #2)
Room To Dream (Front Desk #3)
Key Player (Front Desk #4)
New From Here (Published by S&S UK)

For older readers:
Parachutes

To the teachers and librarians all over this country
working so hard to make sure every child feels seen.

I see you. I love you. I thank you.

Chapter 1

I listen to the quiet hum of the plane and the not-so-quiet flutter of my heart in my chest. *This is it.* Another six hours and I will finally see my parents and my sister again! I try to picture Mum's and Dad's faces when I land. Except I keep picturing Marge and Homer Simpson. Only Asian. With shorter hair. And a less smart Lisa. (Hopefully.)

I guess that's what happens when you haven't seen your family in five years (and you've watched a *lot* of subtitled *Simpsons*). I was starting to give up on the whole going-to-America thing, until my Mum called six weeks ago.

"Lao Lao told me you're doing your middle school applications," Mum said. "And you're writing an essay on your parents being in America?"

I nodded, coiling the phone cord around my fingers.

"Is that not a good topic?" I asked.

"No . . ." she said, "it's just . . . what are you going to say?"

I shrugged. I like writing, but not as much as I like drawing pictures. But art's a sure way to get kicked out of any school in Beijing, let alone Beijing Normal Middle School #3, where I was applying. It was my aunt Jing's middle school. She now has a fancy tech job in Shenzhen. She says there's no future for artists in China. Beijing Normal would get the art out of me . . . and turn me into a steady workhorse. Just like her.

"Well?" Mum asked.

I felt a rush of heat spread across my forehead. Here was my chance to tell her how I really felt about being left behind all these years. I was only five years old when she left. I thought she was going on a *work* trip. I didn't even understand. Most of all, how could she take Millie, my baby sister, and not me? My sister got to grow up with my parents. Me? I grew up with postcards from my parents.

But as usual, my voice was locked in the chamber

of my throat.

There are things I don't want to tell anyone, well, except Lao Lao.

My grandmother, Lao Lao, is my moon and my Wilson. Like the volleyball in *Cast Away* (another movie I binged), she is my companion in my waiting city. That's what Beijing feels like, just me and Lao Lao waiting. It used to be me, Lao Lao, and Lao Ye. But last year, when Lao Ye passed away . . . our trio of tea leaves went down to two. Now I am Lao Lao's human alarm clock (I wake her up every day at 6 a.m.), dumpling steamer, pu'er brewer, flower waterer, and medicine fetcher.

I know how much she needs me. I'm all she's got left. Which is why some feelings are too hard to even tell her.

Instead, I catch them and tuck them behind my cheek.

Lao Lao says that's the way to succeed in China.

Every morning, Lao Lao reminds me: go to school, make your parents proud, and watch your words, lest they label you a bad apple. She grew up in the era of the Cultural Revolution, and her father was thrown in jail for being a "bad apple." Even though

that was a long time ago, the memory of it never really left. She's always telling me to sew up half my mouth. I imagine an invisible thread running along my mouth, my lips stitched like a sock.

But the thing about some feelings is . . . they just won't go away. Instead, they form a tight ball at the base of my throat. Where they sit and they wait, planning their escape from the thread. And one day, just when you least expect it, they shoot out like a rocket.

That's exactly what happened that rainy Beijing spring day when Mum called.

"Do you really want to go to Beijing Normal #3?" Mum asked.

I looked over at my lao lao, craning her head eagerly to catch snippets of our conversation. She put her knitting needles down, massaging her hand. Her arthritis had gotten so much worse since Lao Ye passed, she could hardly keep knitting. The doctors in China had warned her that this day would come. They told her to do more acupuncture, to get out and exercise. But Lao Lao was born in the Year of the Ox. She does not like anyone telling her what to do.

I turned away from Lao Lao, held the phone close

to my face, and cupped a hand around my mouth.

"No," I whispered. "I want to go to school in America. Please, Mama. I want to come."

And with that, I chose my future over my past.

*

A hand on my arm pushes me awake.

"Lina Gao?" the flight attendant asks. I rub my eyes awake. She smiles and says to me in Chinese, "We're moving you up to first class. So you can get out first when we land!"

I blink in confusion. I reach for my sketch pad. I was in the middle of working on a sketch of Lao Lao gardening, but as I look up, my eyes nearly pop when I see the flight tracker on the screen. We're almost *there!*

"Your escort will be waiting as soon as we get to LAX to take you to your parents."

I leap up from my seat. *Let's gooooo!!!*

I follow the flight attendant up the long aisle to first class, staring at all the people stretched out in *beds* with their noise-canceling headphones and candyfloss slippers. These are airplane *apartments.*

I take a seat in one of the cabins and reach for the

fancy first-class cotton slippers. I'm so saving these for Lao Lao. I wonder if she likes her new nursing home.

I feel a tug of guilt thinking about it, but Aunt Jing said it was necessary. She and Uncle Hu both live in Shenzhen, which is about twelve hundred miles away from Beijing, and they both have 9-9-6 tech jobs. A 9-9-6 job means you work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week. They're the envy of the country, because they make the most money. But it also means there's no *way* my aunt can be a tea brewer for my lao lao.

So they took me and Lao Lao to visit the nursing home. I remember the floors were very shiny, almost like you could go roller skating on them. I pictured a bunch of elderly folks roller skating, and then had to bite on my cheeks to stop myself from giggling. Because it wasn't funny.

The rooms were bright, with big windows that allowed the team of nurses to look in at all times. Aunt Jing said she got Lao Lao the biggest room of all – a private room. It was the nicest room in the entire nursing home. But to Lao Lao, it was like living inside a fishbowl. She didn't like the idea *at all.*

"No way!" she said, stomping her walking cane down on the ground. "Not happening! I am a free spirit – I need to be able to roam around the park and go to see my friends!"

"They can come see you!" Aunt Jing insisted. "That's why we're putting you into a retirement home in Beijing – so your friends can come visit. Anytime!"

Lao Lao has two good park friends: Chen Nai Nai, a grandma who loves to dance, and Wang Nai Nai, whose daughter is also in America. I've never seen either of them come to our house, though.

"Why can't I just stay by myself?" Lao Lao asked, peeking at my aunt.

"Because, Ma, your arthritis and osteoporosis, it's all getting worse. And now that Dad's gone . . . Frankly, you should have gone into a retirement community a long time ago," Aunt Jing said. "But you had Lina –"

"And I loved every minute of it, sweet child," Lao Lao said, patting my hand.

I felt a tear escape. This was all my fault.

"No, don't you cry," Lao Lao told me. She nodded to my aunt, and with a shaking hand, she signed the papers.

I put my hand to the airplane window and whisper

with all my heart:

"I'm so sorry, Lao Lao. I promise I will find a way to bring you over. I will find a way to get you out of the waiting city, too."

"Fifteen minutes to landing!" the captain announces on the speaker.

I immediately grab the stash of free goodies next to the candyfloss slippers. I stuff as many as I can into my backpack. Socks, sleeping masks, you name it. I add the stash to my collection of Chinese snacks I've brought over for my (almost) new family. I've packed wheat flour cake, hawthorn flakes, pumpkin chips, and White Rabbit sweets for them, hoping the sweets will fill them with sweet guilt for leaving me behind.

I gaze out the window at the wispy clouds. The Los Angeles houses sprawl across the land, stretching all the way to the shimmering blue sea! I've never seen the ocean before. Before Lao Ye passed, we talked about going to Beidaihe, the closest beach to Beijing. But it was always too hard, with Lao Ye's work and health. He was a magazine editor. Even after he "retired" he kept going into the office. He said working was the best way to stay young,

but Lao Lao secretly suspected it was so he could keep eating lunch at his favourite fried dumpling place next to his office.

My lao ye had heart disease and diabetes. He used to joke that at his age, heart disease and diabetes were like stamps in a passport – signs of a life well lived.

I wish Lao Ye had had actual stamps in his passport, though, and more time to get them. But at seventy-two, he had a stroke in the taxi on his way home from work.

We didn't believe it even when we were sitting in the hospital waiting area. Lao Lao and I were still talking about going to the beach and pushing Lao Ye to actually retire after this. When the doctor delivered the news, all I remember is my grandma falling to the ground, pounding the cold stone floor, crying, "You get back here, you old goat! Don't you dare leave me!"

But her beloved goat was already gone.

Lao Lao's voice comes burrowing into my head as the plane starts to descend.

This is different. Remember, we may be six thousand miles apart, but I'm right there in your

heart. Anytime you want to talk to me, just put your hand over your chest and I'll feel it, sweet child.

As the turbulence jiggles my butt, I open my mouth, like I'm about to eat a gigantic baozi, the tears running down my cheeks. *This is it, Lao Lao! I made it!!!*

We touch down at 9:58 a.m. As the plane taxis, a flight attendant comes up to me. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready!" I announce.