



Chook Kwan

Ng Chok Kwan

8 November 1965 – 4 July 1994

Madam Lai, now a spritely 72-year-old, lost her 27-year-old daughter over 10 years ago to a long-term illness. Brought up in a traditional fashion, she has had to endure bereavement in the traditional Asian way—silently and alone. She also had to cope with malicious gossip about her contribution to her late daughter's illness and death.

Written by Isabelle Lim, from an interview with Madam Lai, Chook Kwan's mother

Chook Kwan was at the cusp of life. Bright and beautiful at eighteen, she was ready to take on the world. But with one fell blow, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) (commonly known as “lupus”) struck my daughter. A big name for a chronic condition in which the immune system becomes hyperactive and attacks normal tissue.

Yet Chook Kwan fought on, acing her ‘A’ Levels with ease and breezing through university. Her determination to excel challenged my two sons to match her grades at university. They couldn’t bear to see their sister, legs swollen from water retention, struggle to catch the public bus to the university campus everyday. So they took turns to ferry her to and from home whenever they could schedule it in their timetables. That was a comfort to me.

After she was diagnosed, I had to watch her grapple every day with hair loss, bloatedness and loss of appetite—all side effects of the medication needed to fight lupus. Yet she refused to let the debilitating illness prevent her from going to work and winning a scholarship to Indiana University for her Master’s degree. My husband was seriously against her leaving for studies as she was already rather ill. But she was determined to go

and excel in spite of her illness. Knowing that it was her dearest wish to pursue an academic career, and that this might well be her last wish and objective in her life, I persuaded her father to let her go. She left with all the giddy excitement of a child who had just taken her first step successfully. For my daughter, it was her first step to fulfilling her dreams—and her last step.

As Chook Kwan beavered away at her studies, lupus cells ate away at her muscles and her joints, little by little. But my plucky little girl refused to let this interfere with her studies. She graduated at the top of her class and wanted to continue with her PhD. Her mind and spirit were willing but her body was failing her. All through her years at Indiana, when we talked on the phone she had never betrayed how much the illness had taken out of her. But my sons, who were also in the States for their tertiary studies, visited her during vacations and always fed back news of her wellbeing to me. The most recent report of their visit was not good. I flew over to bring her home despite her protestations.

When I first saw her, my heart bled. She was swollen and bloated from the medication. Yet Chook Kwan was adamant that she was fine. The next six months were an endless blur of hospital visits, check-ups and searches for a miracle cure. A firm believer and practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine, her father took her to reputable TCM physicians, only to come home buoyed for a few days before succumbing to a weary resignation of hopelessness.

In and out of the hospitals we would go, check-up after check-up—I knew deep down that she would never get well. We sent Chook Kwan to the hospital one night after she had thrown up her dinner's contents and experienced breathing difficulties—for the last time. Whisked away for emergency treatment, I never saw her alive again as the doctors couldn't resuscitate her.

When I saw Chook Kwan's lifeless, bloated and diseased body again, I could only rant and rave inside. I was 60. I had already lived my life, I had imagined lying on my deathbed, surrounded by my children who would send me off on my last journey. It was surreal, a white-haired old lady sending a once vibrant black-haired youngster off to the nether world. It was wrong.

I depended heavily on my Buddhist faith to pull me through the funeral where relatives would whisper behind my back about how my daughter's death was my fault. In his grief, my husband blamed me for her illness and my sons turned to denial of the grieving process. After the funeral, there were many long dark days and insomniac nights in our home.

Whether children die in utero, at birth, in childhood, in their teens or at adulthood—whatever the circumstances of their passing—what really matters is our memory of them, no matter how brief or long they were with us. I exemplify this for I felt her in my stomach, heard her first cries, saw her first tooth, delighted at her first step and beamed at her first academic achievement—only to lose her on the brink of her adulthood.

Slightly more than a decade has passed since Chook Kwan's death. I've since gained a daughter-in-law and three granddaughters. I see a flash of Chook Kwan's smile, a twinkle

of her eyes and her dimpled chin on my trio. They are my source of comfort for (unlike my sons) they have unfailingly trooped to the temple where Chook Kwan's tablet is housed, on festival days and important dates of the lunar month. With bouquets of flowers and fruit offerings held clumsily in cherubic hands under their mother's supervision, they openly acknowledge the existence of their late aunt and sister-in-law who I will always wish they had known.

Now That You are Gone

It's not just that I miss her
It's more that I would die for her
But I can't because she's gone.

On good days, it feels like she's ever-present
But on bad days her absence overrules,
God, life's hard now she's gone.

And sometimes I feel, myself, like a child in my grief.
The tears, the frustration,
The not-understanding-the-situation,
Nothing makes sense because she's gone.

If only I could hold her, if I could have her -
Just for a moment to tell her again
That I love her, but she's gone.

Our sublime happiness has died forever
And yet her life was so well lived,
I don't know what that means now that she's gone.

Friends tell me to remember how she was
And yet their children still are,
That's not easy to take now that she's gone.

My darling Daisy, my beautiful girl,
What is to become of your Mummy
Now that you are gone?

– Josie Klafkowska