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## Reunion in South Korea just the start of her journey

By **ALLIE SHAH**, Star Tribune

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Meeting her twin sister for the first time since they were separated at birth in South Korea was a dream come true for Emily Saunders.

She'd gone searching for a piece of herself she felt was missing, as in a jigsaw puzzle. But her larger, emotional journey is not over yet.

Questions remain about why her birth mother chose to give her up for adoption while keeping her twin sister. And the long-awaited reunion did not erase the emptiness that she says she still feels, in some cases more so, now that she's back and badly missing her sister.

Saunders, of St. Paul, first learned that she had a twin sister seven months ago. She had always known she had been adopted by Jackie and Eric Saunders, of Wyoming, Minn., when she was a baby. But then last summer, she learned her birth mother had chosen to keep her sister.

Meanwhile, in South Korea, her twin, Eunjin Song, was finding out the same startling truth.

Eunjin's mother, who is battling colon cancer and was afraid she would die before meeting her other daughter, told Eunjin the truth in the fall. Then she left her name and number at the orphanage where she gave Emily up 21 years ago.

Already reunited by telephone, the sisters were anxious to meet in person. Last month, Emily and Jackie Saunders left the Twin Cities bound for South Korea. They spent eight days there getting to know Emily's birth family.

"It was certainly an experience," Emily said. "I got a lot of answers, but then it sprouted a whole bunch of new questions."

Though she started out angry at her birth mother, Emily says now that she is no longer bitter.

"She loves me. She probably regrets giving me up," she said. "I didn't think I'd have a connection with her. I had a little bit of one."

Face to face, at last

When they arrived at the airport, Emily and Jackie Saunders walked out of customs and scanned the crowd of people standing behind the ropes waiting to greet the international arrivals.

Emily says she looked down, suddenly afraid to look up.

"I felt shy. This was the biggest, most revelatory moment in my life so I was a little scared," she said. "My mom said, 'I think there they are!'"

Eunjin started waving madly and Emily's birth mom, Joong-ja Song, opened her arms wide to receive Emily.

She squeezed Emily, and Emily says she gave her a "relative hug," hugging her sideways.

Eunjin was polite but shy, too. She grabbed Emily's bag and started walking ahead. Jackie Saunders told Emily: "Go talk to her. She's following your cues."

Once outside the airport, they boarded a bus that would take them to the guest house, a lodging site arranged by the adoption agency.

Emily gave Eunjin a gift she'd painstakingly selected, a silver necklace with an angel wing pendant. Emily wore an identical one.

Eunjin mumbled, "thank you," and then searched inside her purse for the gift she'd chosen for Emily. It was a cell phone charm, the kind seen dangling from phones everywhere in South Korea.

Staring into the face that resembled her own was surreal, electrifying. They shared the same lips, nose and ears. They even had the same lines on the palms of their hands.

Emily said she couldn't stop staring at Eunjin for the first few days.

She saw differences, too.

Eunjin has a freckle above her right eyelid. Emily has one below her right ear and one on her neck. Emily is a lefty, Eunjin is a righty. Eunjin is slightly taller and heavier.

### Conflicting stories

In Jecheon, where the orphanage is, Emily sat down with her birth mother and a translator and asked her why she chose to give her up and separate the sisters.

Joong-ja gave several versions that conflicted with information in the birth records detailing Emily's health problems. She told Emily that it was Eunjin who was the sicker twin and that's why she kept her -- so that she could make sure she survived. Joong-ja then told her that the doctor pressured her into making the decision to give Emily up, Emily said.

"I believe the records," she said. "Hospitals have no reason to lie."

Seeing how frail Joong-ja is and how poor has softened Emily's anger.

Eunjin told her that Joong-ja has been regularly receiving shots in her hip and goes to the hospital several times a week for treatment. The doctors say that if she survives for the next five years then they will consider her cured, Emily said.

After spending a couple days in Seoul, the Saunderses traveled to Sokcho, a town three hours away where Eunjin and her mother live. Emily describes the hill where the house is as a place dotted with shabby houses and flat rooftops that stretch from end to end, making it appear as the perfect playground for Spider-Man to jump.

The poverty disturbed Emily, especially when she realized how poor her sister and birth mom are. Their house is smaller than Emily's apartment. They can't afford heat, so it's cold inside. They sleep on a large floor mat that's heated.

Thinking that this could have been her life bothers Emily, she says.

Twin speak

They had a translator only twice during the trip. The rest of the time, they communicated using a few English words that Eunjin knew, gesturing with hands, acting out words and drawing.

One day, they went to a birthday party for one of Eunjin's friends. When Emily entered the room, the women at the table gasped. They looked from one sister to another and chatted excitedly.

She dreams of a day when her sister can come to the United States to visit and possibly even stay. That way, Emily says, she can see her daily.

"Both girls have dreams -- or are they fantasies? -- that they will be together," Jackie Saunders said, adding that the twins were inseparable on the trip. "I think it's a fantasy that Emily feels that if they could only have little apartments down the street from her where they'd be safe and warm, that would be OK."

It's too early to tell whether the reunion helped lay the foundation for Emily to put the loneliness behind and move forward in her life.

"The whole puzzle piece, it definitely did play out that way," Jackie Saunders said. "It raised some new challenges.

"The whole 'what next' -- it was all about getting to Korea; it was all about finding each other. But there are all new challenges with the what's next part."

Said Emily Saunders: "What I enjoyed most was walking by the ocean with my sister, going shopping together, spending time with her."

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