

EVERYTHING

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also use and don't

TOLD YOU

CELESTE NG



*everything i never told you*

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## one

Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet. 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but this innocuous fact: Lydia is late for breakfast. As always, next to her cereal bowl, her mother has placed a sharpened pencil and Lydia's physics homework, six problems flagged with small ticks. Driving to work, Lydia's father nudges the dial toward WXKP, Northwest Ohio's Best News Source, vexed by the crackles of static. On the stairs, Lydia's brother yawns, still twined in the tail end of his dream. And in her chair in the corner of the kitchen, Lydia's sister hunches moon-eyed over her cornflakes, sucking them to pieces one by one, waiting for Lydia to appear. It's she who says, at last, "Lydia's taking a long time today."

Upstairs, Marilyn opens her daughter's door and sees the bed unslept in: neat hospital corners still pleated beneath the comforter, pillow still fluffed and convex. Nothing seems out of place. Mustard-colored corduroys tangled on the floor, a single rainbow-striped sock. A row of science fair ribbons on the wall, a postcard of Einstein. Lydia's duffel bag crumpled on the floor of the closet. Lydia's green bookbag slouched against her desk. Lydia's bottle of Baby Soft atop the dresser, a sweet, powdery, loved-baby scent still in the air. But no Lydia.

Marilyn closes her eyes. Maybe, when she opens them, Lydia will be there, covers pulled over her head as usual, wisps of hair trailing from beneath. A grumpy lump bundled under the bedspread that she'd somehow missed before. *I was in the bathroom, Mom. I went downstairs for some water. I was lying right here all the time.* Of course, when she looks, nothing has changed. The closed curtains glow like a blank television screen.

Downstairs, she stops in the doorway of the kitchen, a hand on each side of the frame. Her silence says everything. "I'll check outside," she says at last. "Maybe for some reason—" She keeps her gaze trained on the floor as she heads for the front door, as if Lydia's footprints might be crushed into the hall runner.

Nath says to Hannah, "She was in her room last night. I heard her radio playing. At eleven thirty." He stops, remembering that he had not said goodnight.

"Can you be kidnapped if you're sixteen?" Hannah asks.

Nath prods at his bowl with a spoon. Cornflakes wilt and sink into clouded milk.

Their mother steps back into the kitchen, and for one glorious fraction of a second Nath sighs with relief: there she is, Lydia, safe and sound. It happens sometimes—their faces are so alike you'd see one in the corner of your eye and mistake her for the other: the same elfish chin and high cheekbones and left-cheek dimple, the same thin-shouldered build. Only the hair color is different, Lydia's ink-black instead of their mother's honey-blond. He and Hannah take after their father—once a woman stopped the two of them in the grocery store and asked, "Chinese?" and when they said yes, not wanting to get into halves and wholes, she'd nodded sagely. "I knew it," she said. "By the eyes." She

tugged the corner of each eye outward with a fingertip. But Lydia, defying genetics, somehow has her mother's blue eyes, and they know this is one more reason she is their mother's favorite. And their father's, too.

Then Lydia raises one hand to her brow and becomes his mother again.

"The car's still here," she says, but Nath had known it would be. Lydia can't drive; she doesn't even have a learner's permit yet. Last week she'd surprised them all by failing the exam, and their father wouldn't even let her sit in the driver's seat without it. Nath stirs his cereal, which has turned to sludge at the bottom of his bowl. The clock in the front hall ticks, then strikes seven thirty. No one moves.

"Are we still going to school today?" Hannah asks.

Marilyn hesitates. Then she goes to her purse and takes out her keychain with a show of efficiency. "You've both missed the bus. Nath, take my car and drop Hannah off on your way." Then: "Don't worry. We'll find out what's going on." She doesn't look at either of them. Neither looks at her.

When the children have gone, she takes a mug from the cupboard, trying to keep her hands still. Long ago, when Lydia was a baby, Marilyn had once left her in the living room, playing on a quilt, and went into the kitchen for a cup of tea. She had been only eleven months old. Marilyn took the kettle off the stove and turned to find Lydia standing in the doorway. She had started and set her hand down on the hot burner. A red, spiral welt rose on her palm, and she touched it to her lips and looked at her daughter through watering eyes. Standing there, Lydia was strangely alert, as if she were taking in the kitchen for the first time. Marilyn didn't think about missing those first steps, or how grown up her daughter had become. The thought that flashed through her mind wasn't *How did I miss it?* but *What else have you been hiding?* Nath had pulled up and wobbled and tipped over and toddled right in front of her, but she didn't remember Lydia even beginning to stand. Yet she seemed so steady on her bare feet, tiny fingers just peeking from the ruffled sleeve of her romper. Marilyn often had her back turned, opening the refrigerator or turning over the laundry. Lydia could have begun walking weeks ago, while she was bent over a pot, and she would not have known.

She had scooped Lydia up and smoothed her hair and told her how clever she was, how proud her father would be when he came home. But she'd felt as if she'd found a locked door in a familiar room. Lydia, still small enough to cradle, had secrets. Marilyn might feed her and bathe her and coax her legs into pajama pants, but already parts of her life were curtained off. She kissed Lydia's cheek and pulled her close, trying to warm herself against her daughter's small body.

Now Marilyn sips tea and remembers that surprise.

The high school's number is pinned to the corkboard beside the refrigerator, and Marilyn pulls the card down and dials, twisting the cord around her finger while the phone rings.

"Middlewood High," the secretary says on the fourth ring. "This is Dottie."

She recalls Dottie: a woman built like a sofa cushion, who still wore her fading red hair in a beehive. "Good morning," she begins, and falters. "Is my daughter in class this morning?"

Dottie makes a polite cluck of impatience. "To whom am I speaking, please?"

It takes her a moment to remember her own name. "Marilyn. Marilyn Lee. My daughter is Lydia Lee. Tenth grade."

"Let me look up her schedule. First period—" A pause. "Eleventh-grade physics?"

"Yes, that's right. With Mr. Kelly."

"I'll have someone run down to that classroom and check." There's a thud as the secretary sets the receiver down on the desk.

Marilyn studies her mug, the pool of water it has made on the counter. A few years ago, a little girl had crawled into a storage shed and suffocated. After that the police department sent a flyer to every house: *If your child is missing, look for him right away. Check washing machines and clothes dryers,*

*automobile trunks, toolsheds, any places he might have crawled to hide. Call police immediately if your child cannot be found.*

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“Mrs. Lee?” the secretary says. “Your daughter was not in her first-period class. Are you calling to excuse her absence?”

Marilyn hangs up without replying. She replaces the phone number on the board, her damp fingers smudging the ink so that the digits blur as if in a strong wind, or underwater.

She checks every room, opening every closet. She peeks into the empty garage: nothing but an oil spot on the concrete and the faint, heady smell of gasoline. She’s not sure what she’s looking for: Incriminating footprints? A trail of breadcrumbs? When she was twelve, an older girl from her school had disappeared and turned up dead. Ginny Barron. She’d worn saddle shoes that Marilyn had desperately coveted. She’d gone to the store to buy cigarettes for her father, and two days later they found her body by the side of the road, halfway to Charlottesville, strangled and naked.

Now Marilyn’s mind begins to churn. The summer of Son of Sam has just begun—though the papers have only recently begun to call him by that name—and, even in Ohio, headlines blare the latest shooting. In a few months, the police will catch David Berkowitz, and the country will focus again on other things: the death of Elvis, the new Atari, Fonzie soaring over a shark. At this moment, though, when dark-haired New Yorkers are buying blond wigs, the world seems to Marilyn a terrifying and random place. Things like that don’t happen here, she reminds herself. Not in Middlewood, which calls itself a city but is really just a tiny college town of three thousand, where driving an hour gets you only to Toledo, where a Saturday night out means the roller rink or the bowling alley or the drive-in, where even Middlewood Lake, at the center of town, is really just a glorified pond. (She is wrong about this last one: it is a thousand feet across, and it is deep.) Still, the small of her back prickles, like beetles marching down her spine.

Inside, Marilyn pulls back the shower curtain, rings screeching against rod, and stares at the white curve of the bathtub. She searches all the cabinets in the kitchen. She looks inside the pantry, the coal closet, the oven. Then she opens the refrigerator and peers inside. Olives. Milk. A pink foam package of chicken, a head of iceberg, a cluster of jade-colored grapes. She touches the cool glass of the peanut butter jar and closes the door, shaking her head. As if Lydia would somehow be inside.

Morning sun fills the house, creamy as lemon chiffon, lighting the insides of cupboards and empty closets and clean, bare floors. Marilyn looks down at her hands, empty too and almost aglow in the sunlight. She lifts the phone and dials her husband’s number.

• • •

For James, in his office, it is still just another Tuesday, and he clicks his pen against his teeth. A line of smudgy typing teeters slightly uphill: *Serbia was one of the most powerful of the Baltic nations*. He crosses out *Baltic*, writes *Balkan*, turns the page. *Archduke France Ferdinand was assassinated by members of Black Ann*. Franz, he thinks. *Black Hand*. Had these students ever opened their books? He pictures himself at the front of the lecture hall, pointer in hand, the map of Europe unfurled behind him. It’s an intro class, “America and the World Wars”; he doesn’t expect depth of knowledge or critical insight. Just a basic understanding of the facts, and one student who can spell *Czechoslovakia* correctly.

He closes the paper and writes the score on the front page—sixty-five out of one hundred—and circles it. Every year as summer approaches, the students shuffle and rustle; sparks of resentment sizzle up like flares, then sputter out against the windowless walls of the lecture hall. Their papers grow halfhearted, paragraphs trailing off, sometimes midsentence, as if the students could not hold a thought that long. Was it a waste, he wonders. All the lecture notes he’s honed, all the color slides of



MacArthur and Truman and the maps of Guadalcanal. Nothing more than funny names to giggle at, the whole course just one more requirement to check off the list before they graduated. What else could he expect from this place? He stacks the paper with the others and drops the pen on top. Through the window he can see the small green quad and three kids in blue jeans tossing a Frisbee.

When he was younger, still junior faculty, James was often mistaken for a student himself. That hasn't happened in years. He'll be forty-six next spring; he's tenured, a few silver hairs now mixed in among the black. Sometimes, though, he's still mistaken for other things. Once, a receptionist at the provost's office thought he was a visiting diplomat from Japan and asked him about his flight from Tokyo. He enjoys the surprise on people's faces when he tells them he's a professor of American history. "Well, I *am* American," he says when people blink, a barb of defensiveness in his tone.

Someone knocks: his teaching assistant, Louisa, with a stack of papers.

"Professor Lee. I didn't mean to bother you, but your door was open." She sets the essays on his desk and pauses. "These weren't very good."

"No. My half weren't either. I was hoping you had all the As in your stack."

Louisa laughs. When he'd first seen her, in his graduate seminar last term, she'd surprised him. From the back she could have been his daughter: they had almost the same hair, hanging dark and glossy down to the shoulder blades, the same way of sitting with elbows pulled in close to the body. When she turned around, though, her face was completely her own, narrow where Lydia's was wide, her eyes brown and steady. "Professor Lee?" she had said, holding out her hand. "I'm Louisa Chen." Eighteen years at Middlewood College, he'd thought, and here was the first Oriental student he'd ever had. Without realizing it, he had found himself smiling.

Then, a week later, she came to his office. "Is that your family?" she'd asked, tilting the photo on his desk toward her. There was a pause as she studied it. Everyone did the same thing, and that was why he kept the photo on display. He watched her eyes move from his photographic face to his wife's, then his children's, then back again. "Oh," she said after a moment, and he could tell she was trying to hide her confusion. "Your wife's—not Chinese?"

It was what everyone said. But from her he had expected something different.

"No," he said, and straightened the frame so that it faced her a little more squarely, a perfect forty-five-degree angle to the front of the desk. "No, she isn't."

Still, at the end of the fall semester, he'd asked her to act as a grader for his undergraduate lecture. And in April, he'd asked her to be the teaching assistant for his summer course.

"I hope the summer students will be better," Louisa says now. "A few people insisted that the Cape-to-Cairo Railroad was in Europe. For college students, they have surprising trouble with geography."

"Well, this isn't Harvard, that's for sure," James says. He pushes the two piles of essays into one and evens them, like a deck of cards, against the desktop. "Sometimes I wonder if it's all a waste."

"You can't blame yourself if the students don't try. And they're not all so bad. A few got As." Louisa blinks at him, her eyes suddenly serious. "Your life is not a waste."

James had meant only the intro course, teaching these students who, year after year, didn't care to learn even the basic timeline. She's twenty-three, he thinks; she knows nothing about life, wasted or otherwise. But it's a nice thing to hear.

"Stay still," he says. "There's something in your hair." Her hair is cool and a little damp, not quite dry from her morning shower. Louisa holds quite still, her eyes open and fixed on his face. It's not a flower petal, as he'd first thought. It's a ladybug, and as he picks it out, it tiptoes, on threadlike yellow legs, to hang upside down from his fingernail.

"Damn things are everywhere this time of year," says a voice from the doorway, and James looks up to see Stanley Hewitt leaning through. He doesn't like Stan—a florid ham hock of a man who talks

to him loudly and slowly, as if he's hard of hearing, who makes stupid jokes that start *George Washington, Buffalo Bill, and Spiro Agnew walk into a bar . . .*

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"Did you want something, Stan?" James asks. He's acutely conscious of his hand, index finger and thumb outstretched as if pointing a popgun at Louisa's shoulder, and pulls it back.

"Just wanted to ask a question about the dean's latest memo," Stanley says, holding up a mimeographed sheet. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"I have to get going anyway," Louisa says. "Have a nice morning, Professor Lee. I'll see you tomorrow. You too, Professor Hewitt." As she slides past Stanley into the hallway, James sees that she's blushing, and his own face grows hot. When she is gone, Stanley seats himself on the corner of James's desk.

"Good-looking girl," he says. "She'll be your assistant this summer too, no?"

"Yes." James unfolds his hand as the ladybug moves onto his fingertip, walking the path of his fingerprint, around and around in whorls and loops. He wants to smash his fist into the middle of Stanley's grin, to feel Stanley's slightly crooked front tooth slice his knuckles. Instead he smashes the ladybug with his thumb. The shell snaps between his fingers, like a popcorn hull, and the insect crumbles to sulfur-colored powder. Stanley keeps running his finger along the spines of James's books. Later James will long for the ignorant calm of this moment, for that last second when Stan's leer was the worst problem on his mind. But for now, when the phone rings, he is so relieved at the interruption that at first he doesn't hear the anxiety in Marilyn's voice.

"James?" she says. "Could you come home?"

. . .

The police tell them lots of teenagers leave home with no warning. Lots of times, they say, the girls are mad at their parents and the parents don't even know. Nath watches them circulate in his sister's room. He expects talcum powder and feather dusters, sniffing dogs, magnifying glasses. Instead the policemen just *look*: at the posters thumbtacked above her desk, the shoes on the floor, the half-opened bookbag. Then the younger one places his palm on the rounded pink lid of Lydia's perfume bottle, as if cupping a child's head in his hand.

Most missing-girl cases, the older policeman tells them, resolve themselves within twenty-four hours. The girls come home by themselves.

"What does that mean?" Nath says. "*Most*? What does that mean?"

The policeman peers over the top of his bifocals. "In the vast majority of cases," he says.

"Eighty percent?" Nath says. "Ninety? Ninety-five?"

"Nathan," James says. "That's enough. Let Officer Fiske do his work."

The younger officer jots down the particulars in his notebook: Lydia Elizabeth Lee, sixteen, last seen Monday May 2, flowered halter-neck dress, parents James and Marilyn Lee. At this Officer Fiske studies James closely, a memory surfacing in his mind.

"Now, your wife also went missing once?" he says. "I remember the case. In sixty-six, wasn't it?"

Warmth spreads along the back of James's neck, like sweat dripping behind his ears. He is glad, now, that Marilyn is waiting by the phone downstairs. "That was a misunderstanding," he says stiffly. "A miscommunication between my wife and myself. A family matter."

"I see." The older officer pulls out his own pad and makes a note, and James raps his knuckle against the corner of Lydia's desk.

"Anything else?"

In the kitchen, the policemen flip through the family albums looking for a clear head shot. "This one," Hannah says, pointing. It's a snapshot from last Christmas. Lydia had been sullen, and Nath had

tried to cheer her up, to blackmail a smile out of her through the camera. It hadn't worked. She sits next to the tree, ~~back against the wall, alone in the shot.~~ Her face is a dare. The directness of her stare straight out of the page with not even a hint of profile, says *What are you looking at?* In the picture, Nath can't distinguish the blue of her irises from the black of her pupils, her eyes like dark holes in the shiny paper. When he'd picked up the photos at the drugstore, he had regretted capturing this moment, the hard look on his sister's face. But now, he admits, looking at the photograph in Hannah's hand, this looks like her—at least, the way she looked when he had seen her last.

"Not that one," James says. "Not with Lydia making a face like that. People will think she looks like that all the time. Pick a nice one." He flips a few pages and pries out the last snapshot. "This one better."

At her sixteenth birthday, the week before, Lydia sits at the table with a lipsticked smile. Though her face is turned toward the camera, her eyes are looking at something outside the photo's white border. What's so funny? Nath wonders. He can't remember if it was him, or something their father said, or if Lydia was laughing to herself about something none of the rest of them knew. She looks like a model in a magazine ad, lips dark and sharp, a plate of perfectly frosted cake poised on a delicate hand, having an improbably good time.

James pushes the birthday photo across the table toward the policemen, and the younger one slides it into a manila folder and stands up.

"This will be just fine," he says. "We'll make up a flyer in case she doesn't turn up by tomorrow. Don't worry. I'm sure she will." He leaves a fleck of spit on the photo album page and Hannah wipes it away with her finger.

"She wouldn't just leave," Marilyn says. "What if it's some crazy? Some psycho kidnapping girls?" Her hand drifts to that morning's newspaper, still lying in the center of the table.

"Try not to worry, ma'am," Officer Fiske says. "Things like that, they hardly ever happen. In the vast majority of cases—" He glances at Nath, then clears his throat. "The girls almost always come home."

When the policemen have gone, Marilyn and James sit down with a piece of scratch paper. The police have suggested they call all of Lydia's friends, anyone who might know where she's gone. Together they construct a list: Pam Saunders. Jenn Pittman. Shelley Brierley. Nath doesn't correct them, but these girls have never been Lydia's friends. Lydia has been in school with them since kindergarten, and now and then they call, giggly and shrill, and Lydia shouts through the line, "I got it." Some evenings she sits for hours on the window seat on the landing, the phone base cradled in her lap, receiver wedged between ear and shoulder. When their parents walk by, she lowers her voice to a confidential murmur, twirling the cord around her little finger until they go away. This, Nath knows, is why his parents write their names on the list with such confidence.

But Nath's seen Lydia at school, how in the cafeteria she sits silent while the others chatter; how, when they've finished copying her homework, she quietly slides her notebook back into her bookbag. After school, she walks to the bus alone and settles into the seat beside him in silence. Once, he had stayed on the phone line after Lydia picked up and heard not gossip, but his sister's voice duly rattling off assignments—*read Act I of Othello, do the odd-numbered problems in Section 5*—then quiet after the hang-up click. The next day, while Lydia was curled on the window seat, phone pressed to her ear, he'd picked up the extension in the kitchen and heard only the low drone of the dial tone. Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known. If their father says, "Lydia, how's Pam doing?" Lydia says, "Oh, she's great, she just made the pep squad," and Nath doesn't contradict her. He's amazed at the stillness in her face, the way she can lie without even a raised eyebrow to give her away.

Except he can't tell his parents that now. He watches his mother scribble names on the back of an

old receipt, and when she says to him and Hannah, “Anyone else you can think of?” he thinks of Jack and says no.

All spring, Lydia has been hanging around Jack—or the other way around. Every afternoon, practically, driving around in that Beetle of his, coming home just in time for dinner, when she pretended she’d been at school all the time. It had emerged suddenly, this friendship—Nath refused to use any other word. Jack and his mother have lived on the corner since the first grade, and once Nath thought they could be friends. It hadn’t turned out that way. Jack had humiliated him in front of the other kids, had laughed when Nath’s mother was gone, when Nath had thought she might never come back. As if, Nath thinks now, as if Jack had any right to be talking, when he had no father. All the neighbors had whispered about it when the Wolffs had moved in, how Janet Wolff was *divorced*, how Jack ran wild while she worked late shifts at the hospital. That summer, they’d whispered about Nath’s parents, too—but Nath’s mother had come back. Jack’s mother was still divorced. And Jack still ran wild.

And now? Just last week, driving home from an errand, he’d seen Jack out walking that dog of his. He had come around the lake, about to turn onto their little dead-end street, when he saw Jack on the path by the bank, tall and lanky, the dog loping just ahead of him toward a tree. Jack was wearing an old, faded T-shirt and his sandy curls stood up, unbrushed. As Nath drove past, Jack looked up and gave the merest nod of the head, a cigarette clenched in the corner of his mouth. The gesture, Nath had thought, was less one of greeting than of recognition. Beside Jack, the dog had stared him in the eye and casually lifted its leg. And Lydia had spent all spring with him.

If he says anything now, Nath thinks, they’ll say, *Why didn’t we know about this before?* He’ll have to explain that all those afternoons when he’d said, “Lydia’s studying with a friend,” or “Lydia’s staying after to work on math,” he had really meant, *She’s with Jack* or *She’s riding in Jack’s car* or *She’s out with him god knows where*. More than that: saying Jack’s name would mean admitting something he doesn’t want to. That Jack was a part of Lydia’s life at all, that he’d been part of her life for months.

Across the table, Marilyn looks up the numbers in the phone book and reads them out; James does the calling, carefully and slowly, clicking the dial around with one finger. With each call his voice becomes more confused. *No? She didn’t mention anything to you, any plans? Oh. I see. Well. Thank you anyway.* Nath studies the grain of the kitchen table, the open album in front of him. The missing photo leaves a gap in the page, a clear plastic window showing the blank white lining of the cover. Their mother runs her hand down the column of the phone book, staining her fingertip gray. Under cover of the tablecloth, Hannah stretches her legs and touches one toe to Nath’s. A toe of comfort. But he doesn’t look up. Instead he closes the album, and across the table, his mother crosses another name off the list.

When they’ve called the last number, James puts the telephone down. He takes the slip of paper from Marilyn and crosses out *Karen Adler*, bisecting the K into two neat Vs. Under the line he can still see the name. Karen Adler. Marilyn never let Lydia go out on weekends until she’d finished all her schoolwork—and by then, it was usually Sunday afternoon. Sometimes, those Sunday afternoons, Lydia met her friends at the mall, wheedling a ride: “A couple of us are going to the movies. *Annie Hall*. Karen is *dying* to see it.” He’d pull a ten from his wallet and push it across the table to her, meaning: *All right, now go and have some fun*. He realizes now that he had never seen a ticket stub, that for as long as he can remember, Lydia had been alone on the curb when he came to take her home. Dozens of evenings he’d paused at the foot of the stairs and smiled, listening to Lydia’s half of a conversation float down from the landing above: “Oh my god, I *know*, right? So then what did she say?” But now, he knows, she hasn’t called Karen or Pam or Jenn in years. He thinks now of those

long afternoons, when they'd thought she was staying after school to study. Yawning gaps of time when she could have been anywhere, doing anything. In a moment, James realizes he's obliterated Karen Adler's name under a crosshatch of black ink.

He lifts the phone again and dials. "Officer Fiske, please. Yes, this is James Lee. We've called all of Lydia's—" He hesitates. "Everyone she knows from school. No, nothing. All right, thank you. Yes, we will."

"They're sending an officer out to look for her," he says, setting the receiver back on the hook. "They said to keep the phone line open in case she calls."

Dinnertime comes and goes, but none of them can imagine eating. It seems like something only people in films do, something lovely and decorative, that whole act of raising a fork to your mouth. Some kind of purposeless ceremony. The phone does not ring. At midnight, James sends the children to bed and, though they don't argue, stands at the foot of the stairs until they've gone up. "Twenty bucks says Lydia calls before morning," he says, a little too heartily. No one laughs. The phone still does not ring.

Upstairs, Nath shuts the door to his room and hesitates. What he wants is to find Jack—who, he's sure, knows where Lydia is. But he cannot sneak out with his parents still awake. His mother is already on edge, startling every time the refrigerator motor kicks on or off. In any case, from the window he can see that the Wolffs' house is dark. The driveway, where Jack's steel-gray VW usually sits, is empty. As usual, Jack's mother has forgotten to leave the front-door light on.

He tries to think: had Lydia seemed strange the night before? He had been away four whole days, by himself for the first time in his life, visiting Harvard—Harvard!—where he would be headed in the fall. In those last days of class before reading period—"Two weeks to cram and party before exams," his host student, Andy, had explained—the campus had had a restless, almost festive air. All weekend he'd wandered awestruck, trying to take it all in: the fluted pillars of the enormous library, the red brick of the buildings against the bright green of the lawns, the sweet chalk smell that lingered in each lecture hall. The purposeful stride he saw in everyone's walk, as if they knew they were destined for greatness. Friday he had spent the night in a sleeping bag on Andy's floor and woke up at one when Andy's roommate, Wes, came in with his girlfriend. The light had flicked on and Nath froze in place blinking at the doorway, where a tall, bearded boy and the girl holding his hand slowly emerged from the blinding haze. She had long, red hair, loose in waves around her face. "Sorry," Wes had said and flipped the lights off, and Nath heard their careful footsteps as they made their way across the common room to Wes's bedroom. He had kept his eyes open, letting them readjust to the dark, thinking, *So this is what college is like.*

Now he thinks back to last night, when he had arrived home just before dinner. Lydia had been holed up in her room, and when they sat down at the table, he'd asked her how the past few days had been. She'd shrugged and barely glanced up from her plate, and he had assumed this meant *nothing new*. Now he can't remember if she'd even said hello.

In her room, up in the attic, Hannah leans over the edge of her bed and fishes her book from beneath the dust ruffle. It's Lydia's book, actually: *The Sound and the Fury*. Advanced English. Not meant for fifth graders. She'd filched it from Lydia's room a few weeks ago, and Lydia hadn't even noticed. Over the past two weeks she's worked her way through it, a little each night, savoring the words like a cherry Life Saver tucked inside her cheek. Tonight, somehow, the book seems different. Only when she flips back, to where she stopped the day before, does she understand. Throughout, Lydia has underlined words here and there, occasionally scribbling a note from class lectures. *Order vs. chaos. Corruption of Southern aristocratic values.* After this page, the book is untouched. Hannah flips through the rest: no notes, no doodles, no blue to break up the black. She's reached the point where Lydia stopped reading, she realizes, and she doesn't feel like reading any more.



Last night, lying awake, she had watched the moon drift across the sky like a slow balloon. She couldn't see it moving, but if she looked away, then back through the window, she could see that it had. In a little while, she had thought, it would impale itself on the shadow of the big spruce in the backyard. It took a long time. She was almost asleep when she heard a soft thud, and for a moment she thought that the moon had actually hit the tree. But when she looked outside, the moon was gone, almost hidden behind a cloud. Her glow-in-the-dark clock said it was two A.M.

She lay quiet, not even wiggling her toes, and listened. The noise had sounded like the front door closing. It was sticky: you had to push it with your hip to get it to latch. *Burglars!* she thought. Through the window, she saw a single figure crossing the front lawn. Not a burglar, just a thin silhouette against darker night, moving away. Lydia? A vision of life without her sister in it had flashed across her mind. She would have the good chair at the table, looking out the window at the lilac bushes in the yard, the big bedroom downstairs near everyone else. At dinnertime, they would pass her the potatoes first. She would get her father's jokes, her brother's secrets, her mother's best smiles. Then the figure reached the street and disappeared, and she wondered if she had seen it at all.

Now, in her room, she looks down at the tangle of text. It was Lydia, she's sure of it now. Should she tell? Her mother would be upset that Hannah had let Lydia, her favorite, just walk away. And Nath? She thinks of the way Nath's eyebrows have been drawn together all evening, the way he has bitten his lip so hard, without realizing, that it has begun to crack and bleed. He'd be angry, too. He'd say, *Why didn't you run out and catch her?* But I didn't know where she was going, Hannah whispers into the dark. I didn't know she was really going anywhere.

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Wednesday morning James calls the police again. Were there any leads? They were checking all possibilities. Could the officer tell them anything, anything at all? They still expected Lydia would come home on her own. They were following up and would, of course, keep the family informed.

James listens to all this and nods, though he knows Officer Fiske can't see him. He hangs up and sits back down at the table without looking at Marilyn or Nath or Hannah. He doesn't need to explain anything: they can tell by the look on his face that there's no news.

It doesn't seem right to do anything but wait. The children stay home from school. Television, magazines, radio: everything feels frivolous in the face of their fear. Outside, it's sunny, the air crisp and cool, but no one suggests that they move to the porch or the yard. Even housekeeping seems wrong: some clue might be sucked into the vacuum, some hint obliterated by lifting the dropped book and placing it, upright, on the shelf. So the family waits. They cluster at the table, afraid to meet each other's eyes, staring at the wood grain of the tabletop as if it's a giant fingerprint, or a map locating what they seek.

It's not until Wednesday afternoon that a passerby notices the rowboat out on the lake, adrift in the windless day. Years ago, the lake had been Middlewood's reservoir, before the water tower was built. Now, edged with grass, it's a swimming hole in summer; kids dive off the wooden dock, and for birthday parties and picnics, a park employee unties the rowboat kept there. No one thinks much of it, a slipped mooring, a harmless prank. It is not a priority. A note is made for an officer to check it; a note is made for the commissioner of parks. It's not until late Wednesday, almost midnight, that a lieutenant, going over loose ends from the day shift, makes the connection and calls the Lees to ask if Lydia ever played with the boat on the lake.

"Of course not," James says. Lydia had refused, *refused*, to take swim classes at the Y. He'd been a swimmer as a teenager himself; he'd taught Nath to swim at age three. With Lydia he'd started too

late, and she was already five when he took her to the pool for the first time and waded into the shallow end, water barely to his waist, and waited. Lydia would not even come near the water. She'd laid down in her swimsuit by the side of the pool and cried, and James finally hoisted himself out, swim trunks dripping but top half dry, and promised he would not make her jump. Even now, though the lake is so close, Lydia goes in just ankle-deep in summer, to wash the dirt from her feet.

“Of course not,” James says again. “Lydia doesn’t know how to swim.” It’s not until he says these words into the telephone that he understands why the police are asking. As he speaks, the entire family catches a chill, as if they know exactly what the police will find.

It’s not until early Thursday morning, just after dawn, that the police drag the lake and find her.

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## two

How had it begun? Like everything: with mothers and fathers. Because of Lydia's mother and father, because of her mother's and father's mothers and fathers. Because long ago, her mother had gone missing, and her father had brought her home. Because more than anything, her mother had wanted to stand out; because more than anything, her father had wanted to blend in. Because those things had been impossible.

In her first year at Radcliffe, 1955, Marilyn had enrolled in introductory physics, and her advisor glanced at her course schedule and paused. He was a plump man with a tweed suit and a crimson bowtie, a dark gray hat brim-down on the table beside him. "Why do you want to take physics?" he asked, and she explained shyly that she was hoping to become a doctor. "Not a nurse?" he'd said, with a chuckle. From a folder he pulled her high-school transcript and studied it. "Well," he said. "I see you received very good grades in your high-school physics course." She'd had the highest grade in her class, had set the curve on every test; she had loved physics. But he couldn't know that. On the transcript, it said only "A." She held her breath, waiting, afraid he would tell her that science was too hard, that she'd better try something like English or history instead. In her mind she prepared her retort. Instead he said, "All right, then, why don't you try chemistry—if you think you can handle it," and signed her course slip and handed it over, just like that.

When she arrived at the laboratory, though, she found herself the only girl in a room of fifteen men. The instructor tut-tutted and said, "Miss Walker, you'd better tie up those golden locks." "Can I light the burner for you?" someone else would say. "Let me open that jar for you." When she broke a beaker, the second day of class, three men rushed to her side. "Careful," they said. "Better let us help." Everything, she soon realized, started with *better*: "Better let me pour that acid for you." "Better start back—this will make a pop." By the third day of class, she decided to show them. She said no, thank you, when people offered to make her pipettes, then hid a grin as they watched her melt glass tubes over the Bunsen burner and stretch them, like taffy, into perfectly tapered droppers. While her classmates sometimes splashed their lab coats, burning holes all the way down through their suits, she measured acids with steady hands. Her solutions never bubbled onto the counter like baking-soda volcanoes. Her results were the most accurate; her lab reports the most complete. By midterm, she set the curve for every exam, and the instructor had stopped smirking.

She had always liked surprising people that way. In high school, she had approached her principal with a request: to take shop instead of home ec. It was 1952, and in Boston, researchers were just beginning to develop a pill that would change women's lives forever—but girls still wore skirts to school, and in Virginia, her request had been radical. Home economics was required for every sophomore girl, and Marilyn's mother, Doris Walker, was the only home ec teacher at Patrick Henry Senior High. Marilyn had asked to switch into shop with the sophomore boys. It was the same class

period, she pointed out. Her schedule wouldn't be disrupted. Mr. Tolliver, the principal, knew her well; she had been at the top of her class—girls and boys—since the sixth grade, and her mother had taught at the school for years. So he nodded and smiled as she made her case. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We can't make an exception for anyone, or everyone will expect it." At the look on Marilyn's face, he reached across the desk and patted her hand. "Some of the equipment in the shop would be difficult for you to use," he told her. "And to be honest, Miss Walker, having a girl like you in the classroom would be very distracting to the boys in the class." He meant it as a compliment she knew. But she also knew that it wasn't. She smiled and thanked him for his time. It wasn't a true smile, and her dimples didn't show.

So she had slouched in the back row of the home ec classroom, waiting out the first-day welcome speech her mother had given for a dozen years, drumming her fingers as her mother promised to teach them everything a *young lady* needed to keep a house. As if, Marilyn thought, it might run away when you weren't looking. She studied the other girls in her class, noting who bit her nails, whose sweater was pilled, who smelled faintly of a cigarette snuck over lunch. Across the hall, she could see Mr. Landis, the shop teacher, demonstrating the correct way to hold a hammer.

*Keeping house*, she had thought. Each day she watched her classmates, clumsy in thimble fingers sucking the ends of thread, squinting for the needle's eye. She thought of her mother's insistence on changing clothes before dinner, though there was no longer a husband to impress with her fresh face and crisp housedress. It was after her father left that her mother had begun to teach. Marilyn had been three. Her clearest memory of her father was a feel and a smell: the bristle of his cheek against hers as he lifted her up, and the tingle of Old Spice in her nostrils. She didn't remember his leaving but knew it had happened. Everyone did. And now, everyone had more or less forgotten it. Newcomers to the school district assumed Mrs. Walker was a widow. Her mother herself never mentioned it. She still powdered her nose after cooking and before eating; she still put on lipstick before coming downstairs to make breakfast. So they called it *keeping house* for a reason, Marilyn thought. Sometimes it did run away. And in English class, on a test, she wrote, *Irony: a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things*, and received an A.

She began tangling the thread on her sewing machine. She snipped patterns without unfolding them, making paper-cut lace of the layers beneath. Her zippers ripped out of their dresses. She stirred eggshell fragments into the pancake batter; she switched salt and sugar in the sponge cake. One day she left her iron facedown on the board, causing not only a blackened burn in the cover but enough smoke to set off the fire sprinklers. That evening, at dinner, her mother finished her last bite of potato and set her knife and fork down, crossed neatly, on the plate.

"I know what you're trying to prove," she said. "But believe me, I will fail you if you keep this up." Then she gathered the dishes and carried them to the sink.

Marilyn did not move to help as she usually did. She watched her mother tie a ruffled apron around her waist, fingers knotting the strings in one quick motion. After the last dish was washed, her mother rinsed her hands and applied a dab of lotion from the bottle on the counter. Then she came to the table, brushed Marilyn's hair from her face, and kissed her forehead. Her hands smelled like lemons. Her lips were dry and warm.

For the rest of her life, this would be what Marilyn thought of first when she thought of her mother. Her mother, who had never left her hometown eighty miles from Charlottesville, who always wore gloves outside the house, and who never, in all the years Marilyn could remember, sent her to school without a hot breakfast. Who never mentioned Marilyn's father after he left, but raised her alone. Who, when Marilyn earned a scholarship to Radcliffe, hugged her for a long time and whispered, "How proud I am of you. You have no idea." And then, when she loosened her arms, looked into Marilyn's face and tucked her hair behind her ears and said, "You know, you'll meet a lo

of wonderful Harvard men.”

It would bother Marilyn, for the rest of her life, that her mother had been right. She worked her way through chemistry, majored in physics, ticked the requirements for medical school off her list. Late at night, bent over her textbooks while her roommate wound curlers into her hair and patted cold cream onto her cheeks and went to bed, Marilyn sipped double-strength tea and kept awake by picturing herself in a white doctor's coat, laying a cool hand against a feverish forehead, touching a stethoscope to a patient's chest. It was the furthest thing she could imagine from her mother's life, where sewing a neat hem was a laudable accomplishment and removing beet stains from a blouse was cause for celebration. Instead she would blunt pain and stanch bleeding and set bones. She would save lives. Yet in the end it happened just as her mother predicted: she met a man.

It was September 1957, her junior year, at the back of a crowded lecture hall. Cambridge was still sweltering and sticky, and everyone was waiting for the crisp cool of fall to sweep the city clean. The course was new that year—"The Cowboy in American Culture"—and everyone wanted to take it: rumor had it that their homework would be watching *The Lone Ranger* and *Gunsmoke* on television. Marilyn took a piece of loose-leaf from her folder and, while her head was bent, quiet fell over the room like snow. She glanced up at the professor approaching the podium, and then she understood why everyone had gone silent.

The course catalog had listed the instructor as *James P. Lee*. He was a fourth-year graduate student and no one knew anything about him. To Marilyn, who had spent all her years in Virginia, *Lee* conjured a certain kind of man: a Richard Henry, a Robert E. Now she realized that she—that everyone—had expected someone in a sand-colored blazer, someone with a slight drawl and a Southern pedigree. The man setting his papers on the lectern was youngish and thin, but that was as close as he came to what they all had pictured. *An Oriental*, she thought. She had never seen one in person before. He was dressed like an undertaker: black suit, black tie knotted tight, shirt so white it glowed. His hair was slicked back and parted in a perfect pale line, but one wisp stood straight up in back, like an Indian chief's feather. As he started to speak, he reached up with one hand to smooth down the cowlick, and someone snickered.

If Professor Lee heard, he didn't show it. "Good afternoon," he said. Marilyn found herself holding her breath as he wrote his name on the board. She could see him through her classmates' eyes, and she knew what they were thinking. This was their professor? This little man, five foot nine at most and not even *American*, was going to teach them about cowboys? But when she studied him again, she noticed how slender his neck was, how smooth his cheeks. He looked like a little boy playing dress-up, and she closed her eyes and prayed for the class to go well. The silence stretched, taut as the surface of a bubble, ready to be popped. Someone shoved a sheaf of mimeographed syllabi over her shoulder, and she jumped.

By the time she had taken the top copy and passed the rest on, Professor Lee had begun to speak again.

"The image of the cowboy," he said, "has existed longer than we might imagine." There was no trace of an accent in his voice, and she slowly let out her breath. Where had he come from, she wondered. He sounded nothing like what she'd been told Chinamen sounded like: *so solly, no washee*. Had he grown up in America? Ten minutes in, the room began to rustle and murmur. Marilyn glanced at the notes she'd jotted down: phrases like "undergone multiple evolutions in each era of American history" and "apparent dichotomy between social rebel and embodiment of quintessential American values." She scanned the syllabus. Ten required books, a midterm exam, three essays. This wasn't what her classmates had had in mind. A girl at the side of the room tucked her book beneath her arm and slipped out the door. Two girls from the next row followed. After that it was a slow but steady trickle. Every minute or two another few students left. One boy from the first row stood up and cut



right in front of the podium on his way out. The last to leave were three boys from the back. They whispered and sniggered as they edged past just-emptied seats, their thighs bumping each armrest with a soft thump, thump, thump. As the door closed behind them, Marilyn heard one shout “Yippee-ki-yay-ay!” so loud that he drowned out the lecture. Only nine other students still remained, all studiously bent over notebooks, but they were all reddening in the cheeks and at the edges of their ears. Her own face was hot and she didn’t dare look at Professor Lee. Instead she turned her face to her notes and put her hand to her forehead, as if shielding her eyes from the sun.

When she finally peeked up at the podium again, Professor Lee gazed out over the room as if nothing were amiss. He didn’t seem to notice that his voice now echoed in the nearly empty hall. He finished his lecture with five minutes remaining in the period and said, “I’ll hold office hours until three o’clock.” For just a few seconds, he stared straight ahead, toward a distant horizon, and she squirmed in her seat as if he were staring directly at her.

It was that last moment, the tingle at the back of her neck as he stacked his notes and left the room that brought her to his office after the lecture. The history department had the peaceful quiet of a library, the air still and cool and slightly dusty. She found him at his desk, head propped against the wall, reading that morning’s *Crimson*. The part in his hair had blurred, and the cowlick stuck up again.

“Professor Lee? I’m Marilyn Walker. I was in your lecture just now?” Though she hadn’t meant it to, the end of her voice swerved up into a question, and she thought, *I must sound like a teenage girl, stupid, silly, shallow teenage girl.*

“Yes?” He did not look up, and Marilyn fiddled with the top button of her sweater.

“I just wanted to check,” she said, “if you thought I’d be able to keep up with the work.”

He still didn’t look up. “Are you a history major?”

“No. Physics.”

“A senior?”

“No. A junior. I’m going to medical school. So history—it’s not my field.”

“Well,” he said, “to be honest, I don’t think you’ll have any problems. If you choose to stay in the course, that is.” He half-folded the newspaper, revealing a mug of coffee, took a sip, then fanned out the paper again. Marilyn pursed her lips. She understood that her audience was now over, that she was expected to turn around and walk back into the hallway and leave him alone. Still, she’d come here for something, though she wasn’t sure what, and she jutted out her jaw and pulled a chair up to his desk.

“Was history your favorite subject in school?”

“Miss Walker,” he said, looking up at last, “why are you here?” When she saw his face up close, just a table-width away, she saw again how young he was. Maybe only a few years older than she was not even thirty, she thought. His hands were broad, the fingers long. No rings.

“I just wanted to apologize for those boys,” she said suddenly, and realized this was really why she’d come. He paused, eyebrows slightly raised, and she heard what he’d just heard: “boys,” a trivializing word. *Boys will be boys.*

“Friends of yours?”

“No,” Marilyn said, stung. “No. Just idiots.”

At that he laughed, and she did, too. She watched tiny crinkles form around the corners of his eyes and when they unfolded, his face was different, softer, a real person’s face now. From here, she saw that his eyes were brown, not black, as they’d seemed in the lecture hall. How skinny he was, she thought, how wide his shoulders were, like a swimmer’s, his skin the color of tea, of fall leaves toasted by the sun. She had never seen anyone like him.

“I guess that sort of thing must happen all the time,” she said softly.

“I wouldn’t know. That was my first lecture. The department let me take this class as a trial.”

“I’m sorry.”

"It's all right," he said. "You stayed until the end." They both looked down—he at his now-empty mug, she at the typewriter and neat sheaf of carbon paper perched at the end of his desk.

"Paleontology," he said after a moment.

"What?"

"Paleontology," he repeated. "My favorite subject. It was paleontology. I wanted to dig up fossils."

"That's a kind of history, though," she said.

"I guess it is." He grinned into his coffee cup, and Marilyn leaned across the desk and kissed him.

On Thursday, at the next lecture, Marilyn sat off to the side. When Professor Lee came into the room, she didn't look up. Instead she wrote the date carefully in the corner of her notes, looping a demure *S* in September, crossing the *t* in a perfectly horizontal line. As he began to speak, her cheeks went hot, as if she'd stepped into summer sun. She was positive she was bright red, blazing like a lighthouse, but when she finally looked around, out of the corners of her eyes, everyone was focused on the lecture. There were a handful of other students in the room, but they were scribbling in their notebooks or facing the podium up front. No one noticed her at all.

When she'd kissed him, she had surprised herself. It had been such an impulse—the way she sometimes reached out to catch a stray leaf on the wind, or jumped a puddle on a rainy day—something done without thinking or resisting, something pointless and harmless. She had never done anything like that before and never would again, and looking back on it, she would forever be surprised at herself, and a little shocked. But at that moment she had known, with a certainty she would never feel about anything else in her life, that it was right, that she wanted this man in her life. Something inside her said, *He understands. What it's like to be different.*

The touch of his lips on hers had startled her. He had tasted like coffee, warm and slightly bitter, and he had kissed back. That had startled her, too. As if he were ready for it, as if it were as much his idea as hers. After they finally drew apart, she'd been too embarrassed to meet his eyes. Instead she looked down into her lap, studying the soft plaid flannel of her skirt. Sweat bunched her slip to her thighs. In a moment she grew braver and peeked at him through the curtain of her hair. He looked shyly up at her then, through his lashes, and she saw that he wasn't angry, that his cheeks were pink. "Perhaps we'd better go somewhere else," he said, and she'd nodded and picked up her bag.

They'd walked down along the river, passing the redbrick dorms in silence. The crew team had been practicing, the oarsmen bending and unbending over their oars in perfect unison, the boat sliding across the water without sound. Marilyn knew these men: they asked her to mixers, to movies, to football games; they all looked alike, the same blend of sandy hair and ruddy skin she'd seen all through high school, all her life—as familiar as boiled potatoes. When she turned them down to finish a paper or catch up on her reading, they moved on to woo other girls down the hall. From where she stood on the riverbank, the distance made them anonymous, expressionless as dolls. Then she and James—as she did not even dare, yet, to think of him—had reached the footbridge, and she stopped and turned to face him. He hadn't looked like a professor, but like a teenage boy, bashful and eager, reaching out to take her hand.

And James? What had he thought of her? He would never tell her this, would never admit it to himself: he had not noticed her at all, that first lecture. He had looked right at her, over and over, as he held forth on Roy Rogers and Gene Autry and John Wayne, but when she came to his office he had not even recognized her. Hers had been just one of the pale, pretty faces, indistinguishable from the next, and though he would never fully realize it, this was the first reason he came to love her: because she had blended in so perfectly, because she had seemed so completely and utterly at home.

All through the second lecture, Marilyn remembered the smell of his skin—clean and sharp, like the air after a rainstorm—and the feel of his hands at her waist, and even her palms grew warm. Through her fingers, she watched him: the tip of his ballpoint tapping the top of the podium, the

deliberate flick as he turned over another page of his notes. He looked everywhere but toward her, she realized. At the end of the hour, she dawdled in her seat, slowly slipping her papers into her folder, tucking her pencil into the pocket. Her classmates, hurrying to other courses, squeezed past her into the aisle, jostling her with their bags. At the podium, James sorted his notes, dusted his hands, replaced the chalk on the blackboard ledge. He didn't look up when she stacked her books, or when she tucked them in the curve of her arm and headed toward the door. Then, just as her hand touched the knob, he called, "A moment, Miss Walker," and something inside her jumped.

The classroom was empty now, and she leaned against the wall, trembling, while he closed his briefcase and descended the steps of the platform. She curled her fingers around the doorknob behind her to hold herself in place. But when he reached her, he wasn't smiling. "Miss Walker," he said again, taking a deep breath, and she found that she wasn't smiling either.

He was her teacher, he reminded her. She was his student. As her teacher, he would feel he was taking advantage of his position if they were—he looked down, fiddling with the handle of his briefcase—if they were to develop any kind of relationship. He wasn't looking at Marilyn, but she didn't know. She was looking down at her feet, at the scuffed toes of her shoes.

Marilyn tried to swallow and couldn't. She concentrated on the gray scratches against the black leather and steeled herself by thinking of her mother, all those hints about meeting a *Harvard man*. *You weren't here to find a man*, she told herself. *You were here for something better*. But instead of the anger she hoped for, a hot ache swelled at the base of her throat.

"I understand," she said, looking up at last.

The next day, Marilyn came to his office hours to tell him that she'd dropped the class. Within a week they were lovers.

They spent all autumn together. James had a seriousness, a reserve, unlike anyone she had met before. He seemed to look at things more closely, to think more carefully, to hold himself a half step apart. Only when they came together, in his tiny Cambridge apartment, did that reserve drop, with a fierceness that made her catch her breath. Afterward, curled up on his bed, Marilyn ruffled his hair, spiky with sweat. For those afternoon hours, he seemed at ease with himself, and she loved that she was the only thing that made him feel that way. They would lie together, dozing and dreaming, until six o'clock. Then Marilyn slipped her dress back over her head, and James buttoned his shirt and combed his hair again. His cowlick would stand up at the back, but she never told him, loving that little reminder of the side only she got to see. She simply kissed him and hurried back for evening sign-in at the dormitory. James himself began to forget about the cowlick; after Marilyn left, he seldom remembered to look in the mirror. Every time she kissed him, every time he opened his arms and she crawled into them, felt like a miracle. Coming to her made him feel perfectly welcomed, perfectly at home, as he had never in his life felt before.

He had never felt he belonged here, even though he'd been born on American soil, even though he had never set foot anywhere else. His father had come to California under a false name, pretending to be the son of a neighbor who had emigrated there some years earlier. America was a melting pot, but Congress, terrified that the molten mixture was becoming a shade too yellow, had banned all immigrants from China. Only the children of those already in the States could enter. So James's father had taken the name of his neighbor's son, who had drowned in the river the year before, and come to join his "father" in San Francisco. It was the story of nearly every Chinese immigrant from the time of Chester A. Arthur to the end of the Second World War. While the Irish and the Germans and the Swedes crowded onto steamship decks, waving as the pale green torch of the Statue of Liberty came into view, the *coolies* had to find other means to reach the land where all men were created equal. Those who made it would visit their wives in China and return each time celebrating the birth of a son. Those at home in the villages who longed to make their fortunes would adopt the names of those

mythical sons and make the long journey across the sea. While the Norwegians and the Italians and the Russian Jews ferried from Ellis Island to Manhattan, fanning out by road and railway to Kansas and Nebraska and Minnesota, the Chinese who bluffed their way to California mostly stayed put. In Chinatowns, the lives of all those *paper sons* were fragile and easily torn. Everyone's name was false. Everyone hoped not to be found out and sent back. Everyone clustered together so they wouldn't stand out.

James's parents, however, had not stayed put. In 1938, when James was six, his father received a letter from a paper brother who had gone east looking for work when the Depression began. He had found a place at a small boarding school in Iowa, the "brother" wrote, doing groundwork and maintenance. Now his (real, nonpaper) mother was ill and he was returning to China, and his employers wondered if he had any reliable friends who might do as good a job. They like the Chinese the letter said; they feel we are quiet and hardworking and clean. It was a good position, a very exclusive school. There might be a job for his wife in the school kitchens. Would he be interested?

James could not read Chinese but all his life he held the memory of the letter's last paragraph, a scrawl of fountain-pen calligraphy, which caught his parents' attention. There was a special policy, said the brother, for children of employees. If they could pass an entrance exam, they could attend the school for free.

Jobs were scarce and everyone was hungry, but it was because of this paragraph that the Lees sold their furniture and moved across the country with two suitcases between them. It took five Greyhound rides and four days. When they reached Iowa, James's "uncle" took them to his apartment. James remembered only the man's teeth, more crooked even than his father's, one tooth turned sideways, like a sliver of rice waiting to be toothpicked out. The next day, his father put on his best shirt, buttoned up to the collar, and went with his friend to Lloyd Academy. By afternoon it was settled: he would start the following week. The morning after that his mother put on her best dress and went with his father to the school. That evening, each brought home a navy-blue uniform stitched with a new English name: *Henry. Wendy.*

A few weeks later, James's parents brought him to Lloyd for the entrance exam. A man with a large white mustache like cotton brought him into an empty classroom and gave him a booklet and a yellow pencil. Looking back, James realized what a brilliant idea it was: what six-year-old would be able to read, let alone pass, such an exam? A teacher's son, perhaps, if she had studied with him. Surely not a janitor's son, or a cafeteria lady's son, or a groundskeeper's son. *If a square playing field is forty feet on a side, how long is the fence that goes around it? When was America discovered? Which of these words is a noun? Here is a sequence of shapes; which shape completes the pattern?* We're sorry, the principal could say. Your son didn't pass the test. He isn't up to Lloyd academic standards. And no tuition would be necessary.

James, though, had known all the answers. He had read every newspaper he could get his hands on; he had read all the books his father had bought, a nickel a bag, at library book sales. *One hundred six feet*, he wrote. *1492. Automobile. The circle.* He finished the test and set the pencil in the slot at the top of the desk. The man with the mustache didn't look up until twenty minutes later. "Finished already?" he said. "You were so quiet, sonny." He took away the booklet and the pencil and brought James back to the kitchens, where his mother was working. "I'll grade the test and let you know the results next week," he told them, but James already knew he had passed.

When the term began in September, he rode in to school with his father in the Ford truck the school had lent him for his maintenance work. "You're the first Oriental boy to attend Lloyd," his father reminded him. "Set a good example." That first morning, James slid into his seat and the girl next to him asked, "What's wrong with your eyes?" It wasn't until he heard the horror in the teacher's voice—"Shirley Byron!"—that he realized he was supposed to be embarrassed; the next time it

happened, he had learned his lesson and turned red right away. In every class, every day that first week, ~~the other students studied him: where had he come from, this boy? He had a bookbag, a Lloyd uniform.~~ Yet he didn't live at the school like the rest of them; he looked like no one they'd ever seen. Now and then, his father would be called in to loosen a squeaky window, replace a lightbulb, mop up spill. James, scrunched in the back row, saw his classmates glance from his father to him and knew that they suspected. He would bend his head over his book, so close that his nose nearly touched the page, until his father left the room. By the second month, he asked his parents for permission to walk to and from school by himself. Alone, he could pretend to be just another student. He could pretend that, in the uniform, he looked just like everyone else.

He spent twelve years at Lloyd and never felt at home. At Lloyd, everyone seemed to be descended from a Pilgrim or a senator or a Rockefeller, but when they did family tree projects in class, he pretended to forget the assignment rather than draw his own complicated diagram. *Don't ask any questions*, he prayed silently as the teacher marked a small red zero beside his name. He set himself a curriculum of studying American culture—listening to the radio, reading comics, saving his pocket money for double features, learning the rules of the new board games—in case anyone ever said, *Hey, didya hear Red Skelton yesterday?* or *Wanna play Monopoly?* though no one ever did. As he got older, he did not attend the dances, or the pep rallies, or the junior or senior proms. At best, girls smiled silently at him in the hallways; at worst, they stared as he passed, and he heard their snickers as he turned the corner. At graduation, the yearbook ran one photo of him besides the obligatory senior portrait: a shot of him at an assembly to greet President Truman, his head visible over the shoulder of the class treasurer and a girl who would go on to marry a Belgian prince. His ears, blushing pink in real life, were a deep and unnatural gray in the photograph, his mouth slightly open, as if he had been caught trespassing. At college, he hoped things would be different. Yet after seven years at Harvard—four as an undergrad, three and counting as a graduate student—nothing had changed. Without realizing why, he studied the most quintessentially American subject he could find—cowboys—but he never spoke of his parents, or his family. He still had few acquaintances and no friends. He still found himself shifting in his seat, as if at any moment someone might notice him and ask him to leave.

So that fall of 1957, when Marilyn had leaned over his desk and kissed him, this beautiful honey-haired girl, when she came into his arms and then into his bed, James could not quite believe it. The first afternoon they'd spent together, in his tiny whitewashed studio apartment, he marveled at how her body fit so perfectly against his: her nose nestled exactly into the hollow between his collarbones, her cheek curved to match the side of his neck. As if they were two halves of a mold. He had studied her with the air of a sculptor, tracing the contours of her hips and calves, his fingertips grazing her skin. When they made love, her hair came alive. It darkened from golden-wheat to amber. It kinked and curled like a fiddlehead fern. It amazed him that he could have such an effect on anyone. As she dozed in his arms, her hair slowly relaxed, and when she woke, it had stretched back to its usual waves. Then her easy laugh sparkled in that white, bare room; as she chattered, breathless, her hands fluttered until he caught them in his and they lay warm and still, like resting birds, and then she pulled him to her again. It was as if America herself was taking him in. It was too much luck. He feared the day the universe would notice he wasn't supposed to have her and take her away. Or that she might suddenly realize her mistake and disappear from his life as suddenly as she had entered. After a while, the fear became a habit, too.

He began to make small changes he thought she might like: he trimmed his hair; he bought a blue striped Oxford shirt after she admired one on a passerby. (The cowlick, persistent, still stood up; years later, Nath and Hannah would inherit it, too.) One Saturday, at Marilyn's suggestion, he bought two gallons of pale yellow paint, pushed the furniture to the middle of the apartment, and spread drop cloths across the parquet. As they brushed one section, then another, the room brightened like panes of



sunlight stretching across the walls. When everything was painted, they opened all the windows and curled up on the bed in the center of the room. The apartment was so small that nothing was more than a few feet from the wall, but surrounded by his desk and chairs, the armchair and the dresser pressed close, he felt as if they were on an island, or afloat in the sea. With Marilyn tucked in the curve of his shoulder, he kissed her and her arms circled his neck, her body rose to meet his. Another tiny miracle every time.

Later that afternoon, waking in the fading light, he noticed a tiny yellow blotch on the tip of Marilyn's toe. After a moment of searching, he found a smudge on the wall near the end of the bed, where her foot had touched it as they made love: a dime-sized spot where the paint was blotted away. He said nothing to Marilyn, and when they pushed the furniture back into place that evening, the dresser concealed the smudge. Every time he looked at that dresser he was pleased, as if he could see through the pine drawers and his folded clothing straight to it, that mark her body had left in his space.

At Thanksgiving, Marilyn decided not to go home to Virginia. She told herself, and James, that it was too far for such a short holiday, but in reality she knew her mother would ask her, again, if she had any *prospects*, and this time she did not know how to respond. Instead, in James's tiny kitchen, she roasted a chicken, cubed potatoes, peeled yams into a casserole dish the size of a steno pad: Thanksgiving dinner in miniature. James, who had never cooked himself a meal, who subsisted on burgers from Charlie's Kitchen and English muffins from the Hayes-Bickford, watched in awe. After Marilyn basted the chicken, she looked up defiantly, closed the oven, and peeled the oven mitts from her hands.

"My mother is a home economics teacher," she said. "Betty Crocker is her personal goddess." It was the first thing she had told him about her mother. The way she said it, it sounded like a secret, something she had kept hidden and now deliberately, trustingly, revealed.

James felt he should return this privilege, this private gift. He had mentioned once, in passing, that his parents had worked at a school, leaving it at that, hoping she'd think *teacher*. But he had never told her how the school kitchen had been like the land of the giants, everything economy-sized: rolls of tinfoil half a mile long, jars of mayonnaise big enough to hold his head. His mother was in charge of bringing the world down to scale, chopping melons into dice-sized cubes, portioning pats of butter onto saucers to accompany each roll. He had never told anyone how the other kitchen ladies snickered at his mother for wrapping up the leftover food instead of throwing it away; how at home they'd reheat it in the oven while his parents quizzed him: What did you do in geography? What did you do in math? And he'd recite: *Montgomery is the capital of Alabama. Prime numbers have only two factors*. They didn't understand his answers, but they'd nodded, pleased that James was learning things they did not know. As they spoke, he would crumble crackers into a cup of celery soup, or peel waxed paper from a wedge of cheese sandwich, and pause, confused, certain he'd done this before, uncertain whether he was reviewing his studies or the whole schoolday. In the fifth grade, he had stopped speaking Chinese to his parents, afraid of tinting his English with an accent; long before that he had stopped speaking to his parents at school at all. He was afraid to tell Marilyn these things, afraid that once he admitted them, she would see him as he had always seen himself: a scrawny outcast, feeding on scraps, reciting his lines and trying to pass. An imposter. He was afraid she would never see him any other way.

"My parents are both dead," he said. "They died just after I started college."

His mother had died his second year, a tumor blossoming in her brain. His father had gone six months later. Complications of pneumonia, the doctors had said, but James had known the truth: his father simply hadn't wanted to live alone.

Marilyn didn't say anything, but she reached out and cupped his face in her hands, and James felt the leftover heat from the oven in her soft palms. They were there only a moment before the timer

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