

# Everything I Never Told You



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CELESTE NG

Celeste Ng was born in Pittsbsurgh, Pennsylvania, and moved to Shaker Heights, Ohio when she was 10 years old. Her parents were Chinese immigrants who moved to the United States from Hong Kong in the 1960s. Ng's father was a physicist who worked for NASA and her mother was a chemist who taught at Cleveland State University. Ng has an older sister, and she has explained that the character of Hannah in *Everything I Never Told You* was based on her own experience of being the youngest child. Ng attended Harvard University, where she studied English. After graduating from Harvard, she earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan. She has published both short stories and essays in a range of literary journals, and *Everything I Never Told You* is her debut novel. Her second novel, entitled [Little Fires Everywhere](#), will be published in September 2017. Ng lives with her husband and son in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she teaches fiction at the GrubStreet creative writing program.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps the earliest historical event that is significant to the plot of *Everything I Never Told You* is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned all Chinese immigration to the United States. While the act was initially written to be in effect for only 10 years, it was extended indefinitely. Although this law was partially revised in 1943, it was not until the Immigration Act of 1965 that severe limits on Asian-American immigration were finally lifted. The 1950s and '60s saw dramatic changes in race relations in the United States; along with the African-American civil rights movement, activists of Asian descent formed their own movement, and it was these individuals who, in the late '60s, first advocated the use of "Asian-American" in place of "Oriental." The slow adoption of this new term is demonstrated in *Everything I Never Told You* by the fact that Lydia and her family are still referred to as "Oriental" in the wake of her death in 1977. The time period covered in the novel also saw important developments in women's rights. Marilyn attends Radcliffe in the 1950s, an era defined by a return to highly traditional gender roles. The image of the beautiful, cheerful, and selfless housewife could be found throughout popular culture and media, and women who harbored their own career ambitions were seen as unnatural and immoral. This began to change with the advent of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s. "Women's liberation" activists campaigned for both cultural change and legal reform, including abortion rights, non-discrimination, and equal pay. The novel touches on these

shifts, mentioning the gender integration of Harvard and Yale, as well as the Equal Rights Amendment (a constitutional amendment first introduced in 1923 that many people predicted would pass by 1979, but never did). Other important historical events include the Cold War "space race," a term used to describe the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to achieve mastery of space exploration. The race began in 1955; one of its most climactic moments was the launch of NASA's Gemini 9, which is what first inspires Nath to study outer space. Also relevant to the novel is the murder spree of the serial killer David Berkowitz, also known as Son of Sam, who killed six people in New York City in the summer of 1976. It is this series of murders that partially convinces Marilyn that Lydia has been violently killed rather than disappearing of her own accord.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the reader's guide to *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng mentions several other literary works that relate to the book's themes. These include Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle*, which follows a charged mother-daughter relationship; *The Love Wife* by Gish Jen, which portrays the family of a Chinese man and his white American wife; and Carolyn Pankhurst's *The Dogs of Babel*, which is narrated by a man trying to understand the mystery of his wife's death. Other novels that explore similar themes to *Everything I Never Told You* include Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, which follows the lonely and oppressive lives and deaths of five sisters living in suburban Michigan, and Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, which tells the story of the American-born daughter of Turkish immigrants in her first year at Harvard. Upon publication, *Everything I Never Told You* became a key text in the Asian-American literary canon. Two of the most well known authors in this tradition are Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, both of whom (like Ng) are the US-born children of Chinese immigrants. Prominent contemporary Asian-American authors include Alexander Chee (whose novel *Edinburgh* explores the life of a half-Scottish, half-Korean boy who navigates his emerging gay identity in the wake of recovery from sexual abuse), and Tony Tulathimutte (whose novel *Private Citizens* explores, among other themes, Asian-American masculinity).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Everything I Never Told You
- **When Written:** 2009-2014
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 2014

- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American literary fiction
- **Genre:** Thriller
- **Setting:** Middlewood, a fictional town in Ohio
- **Climax:** When Lydia rows out and jumps into the lake
- **Antagonist:** Initially, Jack (before his innocence is proven)
- **Point of View:** Third-person narrator

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Autobiographical inspiration.** The title of the novel was inspired by all of the things Ng wanted to tell her father after he passed away in 2004.

**Musical accompaniment.** Ng has stated that the mood of the scene in which James and Marilyn lie in bed in James' apartment corresponds to the song "Lay Lady Lay" by Bob Dylan.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The book opens in 1977. Lydia Lee is dead, but all her family knows is that she hasn't come down to breakfast. Lydia's mother Marilyn goes up to her room to look for her, and finds everything in its place but no sign of Lydia. Lydia's siblings Nath and Hannah leave for school, while Marilyn begins to fear that something terrible may have happened. Meanwhile, Marilyn's husband James is at his office in Middlewood College, unaware that anything is wrong. James is a tenured professor of American History; one of his graduate student teaching assistants, Louisa Chen, knocks on his door and the two discuss their students' work. Their conversation is interrupted by Stanley Hewitt, who James finds irritating. Then Marilyn calls and asks James to come home.

Back at the house, police officers tell Lydia's family that teenagers often run away because they are angry with their parents, and that most come home within 24 hours. Officer Fiske asks about an incident in which Marilyn went missing 11 years before, but James quickly dismisses this as a "miscommunication." After the police leave, James and Marilyn write down a list of Lydia's friends. Nath says nothing, but knows that the girls on the list are not actually close to Lydia; she doesn't have any friends except the Lee's neighbor, Jack Wolff, whom Nath strongly dislikes. However, even as James and Marilyn call all the girls they believe to be Lydia's friends, Nath doesn't mention Jack. Meanwhile, Hannah keeps quiet about the fact that at 2am the previous night, she'd seen Lydia walk across the front lawn away from the house. The next day, a passerby notices that there is a rowboat floating in the middle of the **lake** at the end of the Lee's street. The police ask James if Lydia can swim and he tells them she can't; a day later, Lydia's body is found in the water.

The narrative jumps back to 1955, during Marilyn's first year at **Radcliffe**, the women's college within Harvard University. Marilyn is an excellent student who dreams of becoming a **doctor**, but faces sexist opposition from both her male peers and professors. Marilyn's mother Doris Walker is a highly traditional woman, a home economics teacher who has never left her hometown in Virginia. In Marilyn's sophomore year, she enrolls in a new course called "The Cowboy in American Culture." She is entranced by the instructor, James, a graduate student in the history department and the first "Oriental" (Asian-American) person Marilyn has ever seen. After the first lecture, Marilyn goes to James' office hours and kisses him. The two quickly form a relationship. James was born in California to Chinese immigrants who worked in the cafeteria of Lloyd Academy, a small boarding school that James attended after passing the entrance exam at six years old. James goes on to attend Harvard for both his undergraduate and graduate degrees, yet he never feels like he fits into American society. During the spring after meeting James, Marilyn discovers that she is pregnant, and the two marry quickly. At the wedding, Doris tells Marilyn that "it's not right" for her to marry James, and Marilyn never speaks to her mother again.

Back in 1977, the Lees attend Lydia's funeral. After the service, Nath aggressively questions Jack and is scolded by James for behaving inappropriately. The narrator mentions that Jack's mother, Janet, leaves Jack unsupervised during her shifts working as a doctor at the hospital, and that Jack has a reputation for taking the virginity of girls at his school. Later that day, Nath notices that the police are questioning Jack and Janet and he spies on the conversation. Jack tells the police that Lydia was always sad, and that this was due to her poor grades, her parents, and the fact that Nath is about to leave home to attend Harvard. Meanwhile, James has gone to his office to read Lydia's autopsy report. While there, Louisa knocks on his office door. Seeing that James is visibly shaken, she offers to cook him lunch at her apartment. They go back and immediately sleep together, after which James sleep soundly for the first time since Lydia's death.

The narrative rewinds 11 years in time, when Lydia is five years old and Hannah is not yet born. At the Middlewood Christmas party, Marilyn asks a professor of chemistry, Tom Lawson, if he would consider hiring her as a research assistant. He tells her he'd be happy to consider it as long as James doesn't mind. That spring, Marilyn learns that Doris has died. She drives to Virginia to pack up her mother's belongings, and finds no trace of Doris in her house other than her beloved **Betty Crocker cookbook**, which Marilyn takes home with her. The cookbook contains recipes and instructions on "keeping" a happy, harmonious household; its advice includes that wives should make **eggs** in their husband's preferred style. Meanwhile, James takes Nath to swim at the Y, but Nath is humiliated by the other kids ganging up and shouting racist insults at him. Shaken by her

confrontation with the reality of Doris' life, Marilyn concocts a plan to leave her family, finish her undergraduate degree at a community college in Toledo, and finally pursue her dream of attending medical school. She writes a note explaining her decision to leave to James, but she tears it up and departs without leaving a note. Her family is stunned by her sudden disappearance.

As time passes after Lydia's death, the police and news coverage both emphasize that she was lonely; most articles claim that her death was likely a suicide. Marilyn insists that this is not true, that Lydia was "very happy" and "loved school." She and James fight, with Marilyn accusing James of being overly deferential to the police. Meanwhile, Nath and Hannah walk to the lake. Nath sees Jack and is overcome by a desire to punch him, but Hannah stops him. Nath explains that he is convinced that Jack was involved with Lydia's death, and he adds that Lydia fell in the lake years before, when Hannah was not yet born.

The narrative returns to the summer in which Marilyn disappeared. James enlists the help of the police in finding her, but he had secretly already discovered the torn-up pieces of her note and thus he knows she left voluntarily. Life in the Lee household has quickly fallen apart; James fails to make adequate meals for the children, the family rarely leaves the house, and all three of them spend most of their time aimlessly waiting for Marilyn to return. Nath manages to distract himself with a newfound interest in outer space, and he watches the news coverage of the launch of the Gemini 9 space flight with glee. When he tries to tell James about it, however, James slaps him. In Toledo, Marilyn devotes herself to her studies, quickly regaining her previous prowess at scientific work. However, she desperately misses her family, and calls them every day without saying anything. One day, after a series of dizzy spells, Marilyn faints and goes to the hospital, where she discovers she is pregnant. A nurse calls James, and Marilyn decides that she must return home and give up on her medical ambitions forever. Back in Middlewood, Lydia tells Marilyn that she "lost" the Betty Crocker cookbook, when in fact she hid it because she knew it made her mother sad. Marilyn takes this as a sign that Lydia is rejecting traditional gender roles and she vows to encourage her daughter to study science and become a doctor herself. Meanwhile, Lydia vows to do everything her mother asks in order to prevent her from leaving again. A few days later, Nath and Lydia go to the lake, and Nath is overcome by a sudden sense of frustration with his parents' favoritism of Lydia. He pushes her into the lake, where she nearly drowns before Nath helps her back to shore. They do not tell their parents about what happened.

Ten years pass, during which time the world is shaken by dramatic political events and shifting social norms, including the gains of the women's liberation movement. James and Marilyn are still fixated on Lydia, with James encouraging her to

attend social events and have lots of friends, and Marilyn enrolling her in college-level science classes. Marilyn boasts that Lydia is a "genius," unaware that she is failing physics and only barely passing biology. Meanwhile, when Lydia discovers a letter from Harvard informing Nath that he has been admitted to the class of 1981, she hides it in a desperate attempt to force Nath to stay in Middlewood. Eventually, however, another letter arrives and Nath finally discovers that he got in. The family's celebration is interrupted by Lydia suddenly exclaiming that she is failing physics, which infuriates Nath. At Christmas, James gives Lydia three self-help books with advice on how to make friends; while Lydia pretends to be happy, in reality she is crushed by this gift. At school, Lydia decides to befriend Jack, who is dubious of her sudden desire to smoke and her claim that she doesn't care about physics. Jack asks Lydia what it's like to be the only non-white girl in school, and Lydia explains that it means everyone assumes they know something about her before they've met her.

The narrative jumps forward to show the Lees continuing to struggle in the wake of Lydia's death. James and Marilyn barely speak, and when Nath notices that James smells of Louisa's perfume, James yells at his son. Officer Fiske calls to let the family know that the police are ceasing their investigation and ruling Lydia's death a suicide, which provokes an enormous argument between Marilyn and James. James leaves the house and doesn't come back, and Nath informs Marilyn that James is probably at Louisa's apartment. Marilyn confronts Louisa, who lies about not knowing where James is (when he is in fact there in her apartment). Knowing that Louisa is lying, Marilyn tells her that "if" she sees James, she should tell him that Marilyn will see him at home.

Three months before Lydia's death, Nath is increasingly suspicious that Lydia and Jack's friendship is manipulative and sexual. When the two hang out, though, they simply smoke and talk, and Jack begins teaching Lydia to drive. Lydia has now resigned herself to the fact that Nath is leaving for college, but she dreams that as soon as she gets her driver's license she will be able to drive away and escape her family too. James gives Lydia a silver locket as an early 16th birthday present; at first Lydia is thrilled, until she sees a photo of herself inside which was taken before the 9th grade dance that James forced her to attend. On her birthday, James takes Lydia for her DMV test, which she fails. Lydia is furious, but pretends to be happy during dinner with her family. Hannah observes that Lydia is at a breaking point.

In the weeks following Lydia's death, Marilyn confronts James about Louisa, claiming that she seems "docile" and would make a "nice little wife." They argue and James suggests that Marilyn must regret marrying him because of how it makes her "different." Marilyn responds that her real disappointment lies in the fact that she was forced to give up her dreams of becoming a doctor. Eventually, James leaves the house. Marilyn

discovers the Betty Crocker cookbook in Lydia's room and begins to realize that Lydia was only pretending to be interested in science in order to be close to her. Meanwhile, Nath buys whisky and drinks alone to the point of vomiting. Officer Fiske finds him and takes him home, and Fiske's kindness is such a contrast to the treatment Nath is used to from his parents that Nath cries.

The penultimate chapter opens just days before Lydia's death. Nath leaves for his campus visit to Harvard and, although he promises Lydia that he will call, he never does. The next night, Lydia calls Nath to ask how the visit is going and he responds to her rudely before hanging up. On the following day, Lydia wears her prettiest dress and lipstick, and after school she attempts to seduce Jack. Jack resists her advances and reveals that he is secretly in love with Nath. Although Jack explains this kindly, Lydia is furious and threatens to tell the whole school. That night, she sneaks out of her bedroom at 2am and goes to the lake. She decides that all of the problems in her life began the summer when Nath pushed her into the water, and she promises herself that she can fix everything as long as she rows out, jumps in, and swims back to shore. The last thing Lydia thinks to herself before jumping is "it will be alright."

The final chapter returns to the period after Lydia's death. Following his fight with Marilyn, James drives away before turning around and coming back to Middlewood. At home, he plays with Hannah, feeling overwhelmed by grief yet comforted by Hannah's love. That night, Marilyn and James lie in bed together, feeling closer than they have for years. The next morning, Nath confronts Jack about Lydia; although Jack knows he is innocent, he lets Nath punch him. Hannah eventually pushes Nath into the lake to avoid him hurting Jack any further. In the water, Nath thinks about his permanent separation from Lydia, and all the things that will happen in the future that he will never be able to tell her. He swims toward the surface, his eyes fixed on Hannah's face.

her. Lydia has a close (if tormented) relationship with her older brother, Nath; once, Nath almost drowned her by pushing her into the lake, and when Nath gets into **Harvard** Lydia hides his acceptance letter. Officer Fiske ultimately rules Lydia's death a suicide, though it is difficult to determine whether Lydia intended to die. Rowing out into the lake, she tells herself that she intends to return to the shore, yet she jumps in knowing that she can't swim.

**Marilyn Lee** – Marilyn is the daughter of Doris Walker and was born and raised in Virginia. Growing up, Marilyn is disdainful of her mother's perfect housewife performance and her vocation as a home economics teacher. She dreams of becoming a doctor and she excels in her studies at **Radcliffe** (the women's college within Harvard University), where she meets James. On discovering that she is pregnant with Nath, Marilyn and James quickly marry, and the family moves to Middlewood, Ohio, where James has been given a professorial position. After giving birth to Nath and Lydia, Marilyn becomes increasingly restless and dissatisfied with her life. When Marilyn learns that her neighbor Janet Wolff is a doctor, Marilyn abandons her family to finish her undergraduate degree in Toledo, with the intention of finally realizing her dream of attending medical school. However, in Toledo Marilyn discovers she is pregnant with Hannah, and she decides to return home. Marilyn ultimately projects her obsession with becoming a doctor onto Lydia, aggressively encouraging her daughter to enroll in advanced science courses. After Lydia's death, Marilyn is forced to reckon with the fact that she did not understand her daughter as well as she thought.

**James Lee** – James is the son of Chinese immigrants. Before their deaths, both of his parents worked in the cafeteria of Lloyd Academy, a prestigious prep school which James attended for free after passing the entrance exam. Although James was born in the United States, he never feels like he fits into American society. As an undergraduate and then graduate student in the history department at **Harvard**, he doesn't have any friends. The subject of his research, cowboys, is rather ironic, considering that he feels racially marginalized and excluded from American culture. At the time James meets Marilyn, he is hoping to be hired as an assistant professor in the Harvard history department; despite being the best graduate student, James is rejected from the position, likely because of his race and social unpopularity. James' consistent experience of racism and isolation affects his career, family, and personal happiness. While Marilyn relentlessly pressures Lydia to become a doctor, James projects his own deepest insecurities onto Lydia in the form of pressuring her to be popular at school.

**Nath Lee** – Nath (whose full name is Nathan) is the eldest son of James and Marilyn. Academically gifted, he enjoys studying and dreams of a career that involves outer space. Shortly before Lydia's death, he is admitted to **Harvard** and is excited about the prospect of escaping his hometown and family. Nath



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Lydia Lee** – Lydia is the middle daughter of James and Marilyn. At the beginning of the book, she has just died at the age of 16; after a few days, her body is discovered at the bottom of a nearby **lake**, and the rest of the narrative describes her family's unfolding understanding of the cause of her death. To her parents, Lydia is docile and easy to please. Marilyn believes she wants to be a **doctor** and James thinks she has a close group of girlfriends—in reality, Lydia is a loner who struggles in her classes. She is the only non-white girl in her school, although she has inherited her mother's blue eyes. Her only real friend is Jack Wolff, with whom she skips school and smokes cigarettes and who she (unsuccessfully) tries to persuade to have sex with

is convinced that his neighbor Jack Wolff is responsible for Lydia's death; he questions Jack aggressively and punches him at the end of the novel before being pushed by Hannah into the **lake**. He remains unaware that Jack had no romantic interest in Lydia and is secretly in love with Nath himself.

**Hannah Lee** – Hannah is James and Marilyn's youngest daughter. She is extremely quiet, so much so that sometimes her family forgets that she exists. She has a habit of stealing "treasures" that belong to members of her family and hiding them around the house. Although she doesn't fully understand the events that take place around her, she is highly perceptive and is arguably the moral center of the novel.

**Doris Walker** – Doris Walker is Marilyn's mother. Doris' unnamed husband leaves her when Marilyn is three, yet she continues to perform the role of a perfect housewife, wearing makeup at all times and cooking elaborate meals and desserts. She is a home economics teacher at Marilyn's high school and is obsessed with the **Betty Crocker cookbook**. When she meets James at his and Marilyn's wedding, she tells Marilyn not to marry him because he is Chinese; after this point, she and her daughter never see each other again. After Doris dies, Marilyn notes that Doris' house bears no trace of Doris' existence.

**Jack Wolff** – Jack Wolff is a boy who lives on the same street as the Lee family. He has a reputation for taking the virginity of teenage girls, and Nath worries about the fact that he and Lydia spend time together. After Lydia's death, Nath is convinced that Jack is somehow to blame; in reality, though, Jack is Lydia's only real friend and he is secretly in love with Nath.

**Officer Fiske** – Officer Fiske is the police officer charged with investigating Lydia's death. He is fair and patient with the Lee family, though he ultimately ignores the beliefs of both Marilyn and Nath and rules Lydia's death a suicide. When Nath drinks so much whisky that he throws up, Fiske is kind to him and brings him safely home.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Janet Wolff** – Dr. Janet Wolff is Jack's mother. A single parent and a **doctor**, she is the subject of gossip within the neighborhood. Behind Janet's back, Mrs. Allen accuses her of neglecting Jack in favor of her career.

**Louisa Chen** – Louisa Chen is a graduate student and one of James' teaching assistants. Like James, she is also Chinese-American. She and James have an affair that begins after Lydia's death.

**Vivian Allen** – Vivian Allen lives on the same street as the Lees and Wolffs. When Marilyn is gone, James leaves the children under her supervision. While Mrs. Allen is judgmental of both Marilyn and Janet's parenting, when she looks after the Lee children she falls asleep in front of the television.

**Karen Adler** – Lydia claims that Karen Adler is her best friend

and talks about her regularly at home. After Lydia's disappearance, the Lee family discovers that Lydia and Karen barely knew each other.

**Tom Lawson** – Tom Lawson is a professor of chemistry at Middlewood College. Marilyn asks him to consider hiring her as a research assistant, but when she doesn't call, he gives the role to an undergraduate.

**Stanley Hewitt** – Stan, whom James describes as "a florid ham hock of a man," has an unspecified role in the history department at Middlewood College. He interrupts a conversation between James and Louisa.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### APPEARANCES VS. DISAPPEARANCES

Following a convention of the thriller genre, the book opens with a disappearance: Lydia's failure to come downstairs for breakfast, at which point her family discovers that she is missing from the house altogether. When Marilyn looks in Lydia's bedroom, she notices that her daughter's bed is "unslept in," although everything else looks normal. The contrast between this normality and Lydia's mysterious absence introduces a tension between appearances and reality: while everything might seem fine, this surface-level normality masks the loss and absence that often exist at the heart of ordinary life. Reality and disappearance, then, are shown to be related.

The fact that Lydia ends up being found drowned in the **lake** confirms the sense that she has not only died, but disappeared, swallowed up by the mysterious vastness of the water. Lydia's death is foreshadowed earlier in the book when, during a trip to the lake with Nath, he pushes her in the water and she almost drowns. When Nath notices that his sister is underwater, he experiences "a flash of complete separateness as Lydia disappeared beneath the surface." The lake symbolizes the possibility that even the closest of familial ties can suddenly be broken when people "disappear." Lydia is not the only character to be submerged in the lake; in the final scene of the book, Hannah pushes Nath into the lake after he punches Jack. While he is in the water, he thinks of Lydia while keeping his gaze fixed on Hannah, not wanting to "lose sight of her face." Nath is determined not to disappear like his sister did.

Other characters in the novel also disappear. When Marilyn's mother Doris dies, Marilyn cannot find any trace of her in her mother's house, and she notes that it is as if her mother was

never there. Similarly, when Marilyn runs away from her family to finish her bachelor's degree, she ensures that they have no way of contacting her or knowing where she is. When Marilyn learns about James' affair with Louisa and exiles him from the house, James ends up driving to Toledo, where Marilyn also fled. Yet despite all these acts of disappearance, the narrative also shows that—short of actually dying—it is difficult to ever truly disappear from your family. For example, after Marilyn leaves she discovers that she is pregnant, a fact that compels her to reunite with James and her other children. Similarly, when Nath looks forward to the prospect of escaping his family when he leaves to attend **Harvard**, it is with “the confidence of someone who had never yet tried to free himself of family.” This description of Nath’s “confidence” suggests that freeing oneself from family is much harder than he imagines.

The theme of disappearance is closely related to the importance of appearances in the book. Doris is the character most immediately concerned with appearances; even though Marilyn's father has left her, she still insists on looking perfect at all times (even wearing lipstick to breakfast), thus denying the reality of her husband's absence. Although Marilyn wants to disassociate herself from her mother's obsession with image, in reality she simply inherits a different version of it. Rather than fixating on beauty, Marilyn is so desperate for Lydia to fulfil her dream of becoming a **doctor** that she isn't able to see that Lydia is only pretending to enjoy and succeed at her academic work. Similarly, James is fixated on ensuring that Lydia is popular at school, and he only realizes after her death that Lydia's stories about her (supposed) friends were entirely made up. Overall, the book suggests that when people become too fixated on appearances, the truth disappears beneath a superficial version of reality.



### SECRETS, LIES, AND SILENCE

After Lydia's disappearance, her family realizes that they know much less about her life than they thought they did, and that Lydia had been lying to them and not expressing her true thoughts and desires for many years. This realization raises the question of how possible it is to truly know other people. Not only does the Lee family not realize that Lydia was being dishonest until after her death, but each of them projected their own ideas about her life onto her. Marilyn thought her daughter was an enthusiastic budding scientist, James thought she had a close group of girlfriends, and Nath thought she had a sexual relationship with Jack—all of which turn out to be untrue. Yet was Lydia's secrecy and dishonesty the root cause of these misunderstandings, or was the problem actually the strength with which her family members believed in their own convictions?

Lydia's secrecy, dishonesty, and silence are hardly unique in the book. Each character withholds and distorts the truth in different ways, and, to some extent, this is presented as being

an inevitable part of family life. However, Lydia's death (along with other events, such as Marilyn's disappearance and James' affair) show that lack of honesty can have a devastating impact on family life. The title of the book evokes the feeling of regret that arises when the desire to be honest comes too late. The “I” and “you” in the phrase “everything I never told you” could describe several different combinations of characters; Doris and Marilyn, Jack and Nath, Lydia and her family. In each case, characters chose to withhold or misrepresent their true feelings in a way that ultimately drove them apart.

Each of the Lee children is particularly inclined to conceal the truth; this seems to be due to the combination of the intense expectations their parents place upon them and the general sense of alienation they have from the town in which they live. Marilyn gives Lydia a series of diaries in which to write her secrets. However, after Lydia's death Marilyn opens the diaries and finds them blank, a fact that suggests that Lydia might have anticipated this violation of her privacy. The blank pages of Lydia's diary mirror the silence of her younger sister, Hannah. Hannah is an exceptionally quiet child who mostly watches others rather than participating in conversation. (Indeed, she is so silent that sometimes her family forgets that she exists.) Meanwhile, even Nath, who—at least in comparison to his sisters—is fairly confident and vocal, has difficulty expressing his feelings. He and Lydia never discuss the time when Lydia almost drowned in the **lake** because it is “too big to talk about.” When telling his guidance counsellor that he wants to study outer space, Nath “whispered, as if telling her a dirty secret.” Overall, the children are suffocated by their inability to honestly communicate with others. After James and Marilyn discuss his affair and James drives away, the narrator notes that “silence settles over the house like ash.” Silence is thus associated with destruction, ruin, and death.



### INNOCENCE VS. GUILT

The concept of innocence plays an important role within the book, most importantly in the context of the question of whether Lydia is an “innocent” victim. There are several ways in which Lydia is associated with childish innocence; for example, she covers her body in baby oil at the lake and her perfume is called “**Baby Soft.**” However, there is a contradiction within this imagery: while the word “baby” denotes youth and purity, Lydia uses the baby oil and perfume to make herself more attractive, an indication of her approaching adulthood and developing sexuality. When Lydia first starts hanging out with Jack, he teases her about her innocence, calling her “Miss Lee,” pointing out that she doesn't smoke, and asking if she has ever seen condoms before. Lydia attempts unsuccessfully to deny her innocence, suggesting that she sees it as a liability. At the same time, Jack's reputation as someone who takes girls' virginity—thereby ending their innocence—crumbles when he is around Lydia. He refuses to

have sex with her and he admits that his sexual reputation is designed to obscure the fact that he is in love with Nath.

In the wake of Lydia's death, Marilyn and Nath in particular cling to the idea that she is an innocent victim. While Nath obsesses over his conviction that Jack is somehow responsible for her death, Marilyn simply invents a phantom person or force who is guilty. Marilyn compares Lydia's death to the case of a girl called Ginny Barron who was kidnapped, raped, and strangled, her body left on the side of the road. Marilyn's discovery of the cigarettes and condoms in Lydia's bag forces her to consider that her belief in her daughter's innocence might be delusional. However, she ultimately dismisses this uncertainty: "Someone must have taken her out there. Lured her.' Marilyn hesitates, the cigarettes and condoms surfacing in her mind, but anger muscles them aside and turns her voice shrill."

The irony of Marilyn's discovery of the cigarettes and condoms is that they also create a misleading picture of Lydia's life. While Lydia does smoke with Jack, he treats her like a "gentleman" and refuses to have sex with her. Rather than a sinister predator, Jack is Lydia's only real friend (and is himself a victim of homophobia and Nath's misguided anger). This confusion of ideas about innocence points to larger issues in society's understanding of the connection between innocence, victimhood, and blame. As the book shows, there is an immense pressure placed on teenage girls to be innocent and pure, as well as a paranoia about this purity being ruined by predatory men. In reality, however, there is no straightforward correlation between sexual purity and other forms of innocence. Lydia is a virgin, but she is responsible for her own death; the idea that she has fallen victim to a sinister predator is entirely fictional. Meanwhile, Jack's sexual experiences belie his own victimhood as someone who is forced to keep his true romantic feelings secret and who is violently attacked by the boy he loves at the end of the book.



## LONELINESS, EXCLUSION, AND PREJUDICE

Every major character in the book is excluded from the world around them and suffers from feelings of loneliness. The narrator describes the Lee family as "a family with no friends, a family of misfits." To some extent, this family-wide social isolation is initially created by the personal isolation of both James and Marilyn. When the two meet at **Harvard**, both are socially marginalized as a result of prejudice—James because of his race and Marilyn because of her gender. They are attracted to each other in part due to a feeling of understanding created through their shared experience of isolation. As they get older, they fail to make any friends or truly participate in the Middlewood community. Both James and Marilyn partly blame their lack of professional success on this exclusion; James believes he was not hired as a professor at

Harvard because he did not fit the social and racial profile required of Harvard professors, and Marilyn feels that she was denied the chance to have a career as a **doctor** due to the gendered pressure to become a housewife.

James and Marilyn pass on this experience of social exclusion to their children. Nath and Lydia are the only non-white students at school, and are socially marginalized on this account. Indeed, the experiences of the Lee family fit into the literary tradition of depicting mixed-race people as inevitably alienated from society at large. This is sometimes understood through the idea of the "tragic mulatto," a half-white, half-African American figure who is excluded from both communities because they are seen as not truly fitting into either. Although the Lee children are half-Chinese instead of half-black, their experiences nonetheless evoke this literary trope.

At the same time, James and the children's marginalization is also rooted in racist stereotypes particular to Asians and Asian Americans. Even though James was born in the United States, "he had never felt he belonged here." The ban on Chinese immigrants meant that James' father had to lie about his parentage in order to immigrate; meanwhile, James and his family adopt false, English names in an attempt to assimilate into American society. Ultimately, this attempt to integrate fails, and both James and his children suffer from racist exclusion and hostility throughout their lives.

After their children are born, James struggles with loneliness more intensely than Marilyn. Where Marilyn projects her own (failed) dreams of becoming a doctor onto Lydia, James obsesses over Lydia's social life. He constantly asks after Lydia's friends, encourages her to pursue the same activities as her peers, and at Christmas buys her three books with instructions on how to "win friends" and "be popular." Ironically, the only real effect of this act is further estranging Lydia from her father. More than anything, Lydia wants her father to accept her for who she is, but instead James exacerbates her feelings of loneliness and isolation by implying that she is a social failure. Jack, the one real friend that Lydia does have, suffers from fear of homophobic prejudice. When Lydia discovers that Jack is in love with Nath (and thus doesn't want to sleep with her), she threatens to tell everyone in school about Jack's feelings, a fact that suggests that experiencing prejudice herself does not necessarily deter Lydia from wanting to inflict it on others.

James' ongoing struggle with notions of social acceptance and popularity contrasts with Marilyn's acceptance of the inherent isolation and loneliness of life. Haunted by her own frustrated ambitions, Marilyn values professional success more than popularity. Yet despite having (reluctantly) dedicated her life to being a housewife, Marilyn is also isolated from her family. After discovering James' affair and ordering him to leave the house, Marilyn thinks to herself: "You loved so hard and hoped so much and then you ended up with nothing. Children who no

longer needed you. A husband who no longer wanted you. Nothing left but you, alone, and empty space.” Although James and Marilyn eventually reconcile upon his return, Marilyn’s despair over ending up alone still resonates in the context of her inability to truly connect with Lydia before her death. While the book optimistically hints that the Lee family learn to accept one another and grow closer after Lydia’s death, this is inevitably tainted by the fact that Lydia herself is lost to them forever.



## EXPECTATIONS, AMBITION, AND DISAPPOINTMENT

When Marilyn and James meet, they are both at a promising stage of their careers. James is an accomplished graduate student who may be on the brink of being hired as an assistant professor at **Harvard**; Marilyn is excelling as a Radcliffe undergraduate destined for medical school. However, in the 16 years following their initial meeting, both of their ambitions unravel. James is not hired by Harvard, and, although he secures another teaching position at the less prestigious Middlewood College, he is haunted by this earlier failure and by his persistent inability to achieve social acceptance. As a result of this disappointment, he pressures his children (particularly Lydia) to be likeable and popular. Marilyn, whose dreams of being a **doctor** are thwarted by marriage and motherhood, also projects her own ambitions and expectations onto her middle daughter. However, where James’ pressure for Lydia to be popular is somewhat gentle, Marilyn’s is all-consuming. Her insistence that Lydia fulfill her dreams of becoming a doctor is so intense that she loses her daughter emotionally even before Lydia’s eventual disappearance. Marilyn does not see Lydia as a person in her own right, but rather as a vehicle for correcting the disappointment that Marilyn feels has ruined her own life irrevocably.

Perhaps the most peculiar thing about James and Marilyn’s expectations of Lydia is their fatal rigidity. It is never made clear why James and Marilyn place the burden of their ambitions almost entirely on Lydia’s shoulders and not those of her brother or sister. This is especially strange in light of the fact that Nath *does* excel in science, and—like his mother and father—is admitted to Harvard. Yet despite his success, James and Marilyn seem only to be vaguely proud of their son, and remain single-mindedly fixated on Lydia. The inflexibility of James and Marilyn’s ambitions is precisely what makes them so dangerous. They cannot accept their children for who they are, just as they cannot accept how their own lives have turned out. It is only after their marriage and family are thrown into chaos as a result of Lydia’s death and James’ affair that James and Marilyn are able to return to a feeling of satisfaction in their romance, even if they remain disappointed by other aspects of their lives.

Frequently, the book depicts ambition and disappointment as

existing in pairs. Where one person fails, another succeeds, and what one person sees as success, another sees as failure. This happens inter-generationally; for example, Doris wants Marilyn to become a perfect housewife like she was herself, and thus perceives Marilyn’s dedication to science as a failure. Similarly, James cannot feel proud of Nath’s academic success because Nath reminds James of himself and his own social failures. Lydia, meanwhile, hides Nath’s acceptance letter from Harvard as a result of her conviction that Nath’s success will further accentuate her own failure. Her discovery that Jack is secretly in love with Nath emphasizes this point, and seems to be the final straw that leads to her decision to jump into the **lake**.

Overall, the book suggests that expectations and ambitions will inevitably lead to disappointment. This is less due to the fact that the Lees’ lives are especially filled with failure—they arguably experience an average (if not greater than average) level of success in life—but rather because the events of life are impossible to anticipate. The unpredictability of life is particularly shown through the novel’s use of the thriller genre; each surprising twist is a reminder of how impossible it is to control one’s own life and fate. In this sense, disappointment is inevitable.

When Marilyn and James discuss his affair, they both speak in terms of disappointment. James speaks of Doris’ disappointment at the fact that he is Chinese, and Marilyn thinks that she is disappointed because she hoped James would be “different” from other men and not have an affair. However, after James returns from his drive to Toledo, he and Marilyn reconcile and feel a renewed sense of commitment to one another. This suggests that, rather than clinging to one’s original expectations and resisting disappointment, it is better to simply accept disappointment as an inevitable part of life.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## WATER/SWIMMING/THE LAKE

Undoubtedly the most important symbol in the book is the lake in which Lydia drowns. Located at the end of the Lees’ street, the lake represents mystery—everything the characters cannot know and everything they do not tell each other. In many ways, the lake is a sinister presence; it is both the site and cause of Lydia’s death, and the description of Lydia’s water-logged body in the autopsy report makes the lake into something of a monstrous figure, something that not only kills Lydia but also grotesquely disfigures her. At the same time, the Lee children are all drawn to the lake; it seems to hold a strange power over them, pulling them toward it at critical moments in their lives. Shortly before

Lydia's death, she identifies the time when Nath pushed her into the lake as the moment in which everything in her life started going "wrong." She decides that she will be able to fix everything as long as she can jump in the lake again and swim back to shore. This desire evokes the Christian tradition of baptism in which believers are "born again" and symbolically washed free of sin by being submerged in water. However, Lydia's decision to jump is highly risky and irrational; it is the middle of the night, she is alone, and she cannot swim.

Swimming is also symbolically significant in the novel. Both James and Nath are strong swimmers, and when Nath is young James fantasizes that he will grow up to be a popular star of the high school swim team. However, rather than leading to popularity, swimming ends up reemphasizing Nath's marginalization. When James takes Nath to the Y, the other children abandon Nath in the middle of a game of Marco Polo and shout racist insults at him. The experience of being in water often reminds characters of their own isolation—this happens when Nath swims at the Y, when he pushes Lydia into the lake, and when Hannah pushes him into the lake at the end of the novel. There is also a connection between this isolation and the metaphorical concept of "drowning." Shortly before her death, Lydia reflects that Nath has been "keeping her afloat." When he goes to **Harvard**, she worries that she will permanently "sink" under the pressure of her parents' suffocating attention and expectations. In reality, this fear leads Lydia to drown in the literal sense.



## HARVARD/RADCLIFFE

James and Marilyn meet at Harvard, and Nath's imminent enrollment there haunts the entire book.

However, each of these characters has a very different relationship with the institution. Harvard represents James' academic accomplishments—he completes both his undergraduate and doctoral degrees there—but it also represents his failures. As a graduate student, James has no friends and he isn't awarded a tenure-track position in the history department even though he is the most qualified candidate. Although James is intellectually skilled, he fails to meet the social (and arguably racial) criteria demanded by the institution. As an undergraduate, Marilyn enrolls at Radcliffe, the women's college housed within Harvard. Marilyn excels academically, yet fails to be taken seriously by her male classmates and professors. Furthermore, she is haunted by Doris' hope that she marry a "Harvard man." Marilyn insists to herself that she wasn't there "to find a man" but "for something better." However, despite her best efforts, Marilyn does marry a Harvard man (though not the kind Doris had in mind) and, in doing so, jeopardizes her own dreams of graduating from Radcliffe and continuing on to medical school. Although Marilyn tells herself that she will only take a few years off before returning to complete her degree, once she leaves

Radcliffe, her dreams of becoming a **doctor** remain forever out of her reach.

To Nath, Harvard presents an opportunity to escape his family and achieve a kind of rebirth. Whereas in Middlewood Nath is socially alienated and burdened by the tensions within his family, he hopes that in college he will have the opportunity to remake himself as a more carefree, popular, and mature person. Attending Harvard also allows Nath to pursue his dream of studying outer space. At the same time, Lydia's death casts a dark shadow over what would otherwise be a joyous, liberating moment. Rather than being able to focus on the excitement of going to college like any normal 18-year-old, Nath must deal with feelings of shock, guilt, and grief, even as he looks forward to moving into the next stage of his life.



## THE BETTY CROCKER COOKBOOK

Betty Crocker is, according to Marilyn, Doris' "personal goddess," and Doris treasures the red cookbook instructing housewives on how to create a happy home filled with elaborate meals and treats. When Marilyn goes to pack up her mother's house after Doris' death, she finds no trace of her mother among any of the photos or other belongings Doris left behind. The only thing that reminds Marilyn of her mother is the Betty Crocker cookbook, and thus she decides to keep it while throwing away everything else. However, the cookbook comes to haunt Marilyn, reminding her of how desperately—yet unsuccessfully—she tried to escape the false and restrictive role of a housewife. Marilyn feels cynical about the cookbook's naïve promises of domestic happiness and harmony, given that her experience of familial life has been filled with disappointment, tension, and turmoil. When Marilyn runs away to Toledo, Lydia finds the cookbook and notices that it is stained with Marilyn's tears. Lydia hides it so Marilyn will never have to see it again, and later Lydia claims that she lost it. After Lydia's death, Marilyn realizes that Lydia's claim to have lost the cookbook was a lie, and that in reality she was attempting to protect Marilyn from seeing it. It is this act that makes Marilyn realize how much Lydia both understood and loved her; ironically, therefore, the Betty Crocker cookbook is ultimately associated with an act of genuine love.



## DOCTORS

For almost her entire life, Marilyn is obsessed with becoming a doctor. It is a dream she has harbored since childhood, and whenever she faces opposition (mostly in the form of sexist prejudice against the idea of a female doctor), it only makes her more fervently attached to the ambition. Yet after marrying James and giving birth to Nath and Lydia, what was once a plausible goal becomes further and further out of Marilyn's reach. Despite this change of circumstances, Marilyn remains obsessively fixated on the world of medicine, so much

so that it leads her to strange and irrational behavior, such as driving to the Middlewood hospital for no reason. Upon learning that Janet Wolff is a doctor, Marilyn experiences a kind of emotional break, which eventually leads her to run away from her family and finish her undergraduate studies at a community college in Toledo. When she is ultimately forced to abandon her goal of becoming a doctor, Marilyn displaces her ambitions by projecting them onto Lydia. From a young age, Lydia is aware that Marilyn wishes to live out her own dream through Lydia, and Lydia describes Marilyn's heart as "drumming one beat: *doctor, doctor, doctor.*" Although being a doctor revolves around healing and caring for people, the novel places the role of "doctor" in opposition to the role of being a good mother. Mrs. Allen accuses Janet of neglecting Jack during her shifts at the hospital, and it is Marilyn's unrealized medical ambitions that lead her to cause pain to Lydia and other members of her family.



## EGGS

One of the sections of Doris' **Betty Crocker cookbook** that has the greatest impact on Marilyn is entitled "Basic Eggs." It instructs housewives to know all six "basic ways" to make an egg and to learn their husband's preferred style. Despite Marilyn's resistance to this whole concept, she does make eggs for each member of her family in their favorite style: "Sunny-side up for James. Hard-boiled for Nath. Scrambled for Lydia." Eggs thus represent the thoughtful and often painstaking work that goes into being a wife and mother—work that Marilyn comes to resent as pointless and banal. When Marilyn "disappears" to Toledo, Nath is heartbroken that there is no one around to make him a hard-boiled egg, as this represents to him the care and stability that he craves. Indeed, eggs are a common symbol of reproduction, the family, and the future. In being so dismissive of the work of making eggs, perhaps Marilyn undervalues the importance of caring for her family (even if this work is less conventionally glamorous or impressive than being a **doctor**).



## LYDIA'S "BABY SOFT" PERFUME

When Lydia dies she is 16, right in the middle of the charged transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. To some extent, Lydia is still a young girl with an irrationally childlike way of thinking and little experience of adult matters. At the same time, she is also being introduced to activities associated with the loss of innocence during adolescence, such as smoking and having sex. This contrast of innocence and maturity is symbolized in Lydia's perfume, which is called "Baby Soft." As perfume, it is designed to make Lydia more attractive, and thus it is inherently linked to sexuality. On the other hand, the perfume's name suggests purity and infancy. The combination of these two conflicting ideas

illustrates the way in which teenage girls are placed under pressure to be simultaneously "innocent" and sexy, and that for many 16-year-olds, the binary between innocence and maturity becomes confusingly blurred.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Everything I Never Told You* published in 2015.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☹☹ 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 book bag 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.

**Related Characters:** Lydia Lee, Marilyn Lee

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1-2

### Explanation and Analysis

It is a normal morning at the Lee house, but Lydia has failed to come down to breakfast. The reader knows that she is dead, but her family does not. Lydia's mother, Marilyn, has gone up to look for Lydia in her room, and in this passage she sees everything in its place but no sign of Lydia herself. The description of Lydia's bedroom gives an impression of Lydia's life and personality, even before she has personally appeared on the page. The "rainbow-striped sock" and book bag convey that she is still young, an impression emphasized by the "loved-baby scent" of her perfume. Meanwhile, the "neat hospital corners" of Lydia's bed and "row of science ribbons" on the wall evoke someone who is disciplined and accomplished.

However, Lydia's bedroom and belongings only give a partial portrait of who she really is. There is clearly information missing, made obvious by the fact that Lydia herself is not there. Indeed, her mysterious absence seems to contradict the image of her as both youthfully innocent and a disciplined, dutiful student. This contrast introduces the

discrepancies between appearances and reality that occur throughout the book, as well as the tension between appearances and disappearances. If Lydia's life is as ordinary and orderly as it seems, why has she mysteriously vanished?

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ 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.

**Related Characters:** Marilyn Lee, Doris Walker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 28

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator describes Marilyn's mother Doris, who is a total contrast to her daughter. Whereas Marilyn wants to take shop instead of home economics and dreams of becoming a doctor, Doris is the school's home economics teacher and a proud housewife. In her classroom, Doris teaches girls how to "keep house," a phrase Marilyn finds odd. However, Marilyn's father left the family when she was three, and in this passage Marilyn observes that perhaps "keeping house" is a more apt phrase than it first appears. This observation emphasizes the theme of appearances versus disappearances—Doris works ardently to make it appear as though everything in her family is normal, but she cannot change the truth that her husband left her. This raises the question of whom Doris' performance is intended to serve—Marilyn? Doris herself? The absent figure of Doris' husband? This passage also shows that, early on in Marilyn's life, she saw home as an unstable and even oppressive place. These associations with home will haunt Marilyn's future and inform some of her more irrational-seeming actions.

☛☛ 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.

**Related Characters:** Marilyn Lee, James Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 45-46

### Explanation and Analysis

When James and Marilyn meet, he is a lonely graduate student who has spent his life feeling alienated and unwelcome in the country in which he was born. To James' surprise, rather than being put off by his status as an outsider, Marilyn is attracted to it. When the couple lies in bed together, James marvels at Marilyn's "honey-colored hair," which to him represents Marilyn's identity as a "normal" white American. In this passage, the narrator describes how James' joy at being embraced by Marilyn is tinged with anxiety that their union is too good to be true. Although James' fears that "he wasn't supposed to have her" are irrational, his sense that she will "disappear from his life as suddenly as she had entered" is actually correct.

From James' perspective, his and Marilyn's relationship seems inherently doomed because of their racial differences. James has internalized the prejudice and alienation to which he has been subjected throughout his life, and, as a result, he believes that he doesn't deserve Marilyn. In reality, the biggest threat to James and Marilyn's relationship is not their racial difference itself, but rather their differing attitudes toward social conformity (which are, of course, not unrelated to their respective racial experiences). Marilyn wants to excel and stand out, and she is drawn to James because she feels that he understands what it is like to be an outsider. Meanwhile, James is attracted to Marilyn precisely because she "fits in," and he hopes that by being with her he will finally be embraced by American society. In reality, these differing views spell disaster for their union.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ Marilyn, unaware that her youngest is listening so closely, so longingly, blots her eyes and replaces the diaries on the shelf and makes herself a promise. She will figure out what happened to Lydia. She will find out who is responsible. She will find out what went wrong.

**Related Characters:** Hannah Lee, Lydia Lee, Marilyn Lee

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

In an attempt to understand what happened to Lydia, Marilyn has searched through Lydia's bedroom and opened the series of diaries that Marilyn has been giving Lydia since she was five years old. However, Marilyn was surprised to find all of them blank. The blank diaries have a double significance. First, the fact that Marilyn has consistently given Lydia a gift that Lydia hasn't ever used underscores the discrepancy between Marilyn's desires for Lydia's life and Lydia's own ideas about herself (the blank diaries also suggest that Lydia might not know herself well enough to reflect on who she is, perhaps a result of Marilyn's overbearing influence). Second, the fact that the diaries (which should reveal Lydia's innermost thoughts) are blank shows that Lydia is going to remain a mystery to Marilyn, a mystery that Marilyn is determined to resolve. Yet this passage indicates that Marilyn may be less adept at understanding the world around her than she'd hoped. Marilyn assumes that there is someone who is "responsible" for Lydia's death, but there is no evidence that an external party was to blame. Meanwhile, as Marilyn sits in Lydia's bedroom, she doesn't notice Hannah "listening so closely," a detail that highlights the way in which Marilyn is blind to things that are immediately in front of her.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ When Nath had been born, then Lydia, Marilyn had not informed her mother, had not even sent a photograph. What was there to say? She and James had never discussed what her mother had said about their marriage that last day: *it's not right*. She had not ever wanted to think of it again. So when James came home that night, she said simply, "My mother died." Then she turned back to the stove and added, "And the lawn needs mowing," and he understood: they would not talk about it.

**Related Characters:** James Lee, Doris Walker, Marilyn Lee, Lydia Lee, Nath Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 80

### Explanation and Analysis

After Doris' disapproving comments at Marilyn and James' wedding, Marilyn never talks to her mother again, and when Nath and Lydia are young children, she gets a call informing her that Doris has died of a stroke. This passage describes Marilyn's reaction to her mother's death, revealing Marilyn's profound and sustained anger at Doris. It also illustrates the extent to which Marilyn shuts out the

memory of her mother. Not only does she never speak to Doris again, but she also refuses to mention Doris to James and the children. Marilyn enters a state of denial about her mother, making Doris "disappear" from her life even before she is actually dead.

Early in their relationship, Marilyn and James establish a pact not to discuss the past, and this mutual understanding brings them closer together. However, the novel calls into question how sustainable such a pact could be, since it involves such extreme suppression. Not only does Marilyn cut off Doris completely, she also prohibits any opportunity for her children to know their own grandmother. Although this specific instance arguably prevents the children from the possibility of experiencing racism at the hands of their own grandmother, Marilyn's repression and silence are part of a behavioral pattern that ultimately comes to have a damaging impact on the Lee family.

☛☛ Three photo albums of Marilyn and not a single shot of her mother. As if

her mother had never been there. Was she sad? How could she miss her mother when her mother was nowhere to be found?

And then, in the kitchen, she discovered her mother's Betty Crocker cookbook, the spine cracking and mended, twice, with Scotch tape. On the first page of the cookie section, a deliberate line in the margin of the introduction, the kind she herself had made in college to mark an important passage. It was no recipe. *Always cookies in the cookie jar!* the paragraph read. *Is there a happier symbol of a friendly house?* That was all. Her mother had felt the need to highlight this.

**Related Characters:** Hannah Lee, Marilyn Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

Following Doris' death, Marilyn has gone to her childhood home in Virginia in order to pack up her mother's belongings. Marilyn is surprised by how familiar the house feels, and, furthermore, she is shocked by the extent to which Doris' possessions bear no trace of her own existence. This confirms Marilyn's feeling that Doris was not a whole person but merely a shell of a person, and that this

is why Marilyn was never able to have a close connection to her mother. Indeed, this idea is confirmed, for Marilyn, by the presence of the well-loved Betty Crocker cookbook. Marilyn concludes that Doris, rather than pursuing her own thoughts and interests, subscribed to the model of ideal femininity propagated by Betty Crocker.

Marilyn's disdain for Doris' idealization of Betty Crocker is made clear by the statement: "Her mother had felt the need to highlight this." While Marilyn took advanced chemistry courses at Harvard, Doris studied the Betty Crocker cookbook as if it were a textbook, and Marilyn seems to think that this is ridiculous. At the same time, the events of the book suggest that family dynamics and happiness may be far more complicated than Marilyn believes.

So part of him wanted to tell Nath that he knew: what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. The other part of him wanted to shake his son, to slap him. To shape him into something different. Later, when Nath was too slight for the football team, too short for the basketball team, too clumsy for the baseball team, when he seemed to prefer reading and poring over his atlas and peering through his telescope to making friends, James would think back to this day in the swimming pool, this first disappointment in his son, this first and most painful puncture in his fatherly dreams.

**Related Characters:** Nath Lee, James Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

James has taken Nath to the Y to encourage his reluctant son to swim with the other kids. However, once Nath is in the pool the other children deliberately desert him in the middle of a game of Marco Polo before taunting him with racist insults. Upon realizing what has happened, Nath furiously rushes to the locker room, refusing to say anything to his father. This passage describes James' conflicting feelings as a result of the incident at the Y. James feels sympathetic to Nath, particularly as James himself has experienced a lifetime of prejudice, bullying, and exclusion. However, it is this very parallel that discourages James from comforting Nath and instead makes him want to react with violence.

The anger that James feels is arguably not truly directed at Nath, but instead at himself. James is frustrated and disappointed in his own inability to become "normal" and popular, yet he takes these feelings out on his son. This illustrates one of the dangers of parents attempting to live out their own ambitions through their children—it can lead them to blame their children for things that are not their fault.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

The story—as it emerges from the teachers and the kids at school—is so obvious. Lydia's quietness, her lack of friends. Her recent sinking grades. And, in truth, the strangeness of her family. A family with no friends, a family of misfits. All this shines so brightly that, in the eyes of the police, Jack falls into shadow. A girl like that and a boy like him, who can have—does have—any girl he wants? It is impossible for them to imagine what Nath knows to be true, let alone what he himself imagines.

**Related Characters:** Nath Lee, Jack Wolff, Lydia Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

The police have told the Lee family that, although they are still investigating, there is no evidence that anyone else was involved with Lydia's death. James thanks them, but both Marilyn and Nath are dissatisfied. Marilyn insists that a "psycho" must have killed Lydia, whereas Nath is convinced that Jack Wolff is to blame. Unlike his parents, Nath has a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of Lydia's life, including other people's perceptions of her. He thus understands why the police believe that Lydia committed suicide, even as he disagrees with this interpretation. Nath's commitment to his own theory about Lydia's death shows the extent to which people tend to cling to their own interpretations of the world, even when it conflicts with the views of everyone else.

This passage also highlights how the Lee's racial difference alienates them from the Middlewood community. The phrase "family of misfits" suggests that people see the Lee family as internally mismatched and that this, in turn, makes them at odds with the world around them.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ The summer Lydia fell in the lake, the summer Marilyn went missing: all of them had tried to forget it. They did not talk about it; they never mentioned it. But it lingered, like a bad smell. It had suffused them so deeply it could never wash out.

**Related Characters:** Marilyn Lee, Lydia Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 122

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is the opening passage to Chapter 6. At the end of the previous chapter, Nath told Hannah that Lydia fell in the lake once before and when Hannah said she couldn't remember that happening, Nath explained that it was before Hannah was born. In this passage, the narrator makes an explicit connection between two disappearances: Marilyn's flight to Toledo and Lydia's far briefer "disappearance" into the water. Although the details of these events have yet to be revealed, it is clear that they are traumatic memories that the Lees have attempted to suppress in order to maintain the appearance of happiness and normalcy.

However, as the narrator's words suggest, the attempt to suppress these memories is inherently doomed. Even though the Lee family does not talk about Marilyn and Lydia's disappearances, these events have become a part of them. Denying the fact that they happened thus becomes a way of denying who they really are as a family.

☞ Up there--eighty-five miles high, ninety, ninety-five, the counter said--everything on earth would be invisible. Mothers who disappeared, fathers who didn't love you, kids who mocked you--everything would shrink to pinpoints and vanish. Up there: nothing but stars.

**Related Characters:** James Lee, Marilyn Lee, Nath Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 133

**Explanation and Analysis**

Since Marilyn's disappearance, James and the children have been left in a depressed, despairing state. Marilyn's absence haunts their days; they rarely leave the house and they spend most of their time sitting around aimlessly (and hopelessly) waiting for her to come home. Nath is able to distract himself slightly, however, by following the launch of the *Gemini 9*. It is at this moment that Nath's burgeoning interest in outer space gains momentum, and this passage makes clear that Nath not only finds space inherently interesting, but he also relishes the way in which thinking about space shrinks the magnitude of the problems facing the Lee family.

While, to James and Lydia, Marilyn's disappearance has become all-consuming, Nath channels his sadness and anxiety in a productive way, by obsessively learning as much as he can about space travel. Indeed, this could be identified as a major factor that distinguishes Nath from his sister, and it is perhaps the reason that Nath is able to survive and flourish amid the turmoil of his family, while Lydia is crushed by it. Lydia never develops any real interests outside of her family, and thus the burden of her relationship with her parents takes over her life.

☞ NaOH became Nath, his small face wide-eyed and reproachful. One morning, consulting the periodic table, instead of helium she thought He and James's face floated up in her mind. Other days, the messages were more subtle: a typo in the textbook--"the common acids, egg. nitric, acetic..."--left her in tears, thinking of hard-boiled, sunnyside up, scrambled.

**Related Characters:** James Lee, Marilyn Lee, Nath Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 138

**Explanation and Analysis**

In many ways, Marilyn's disappearance to Toledo is turning out exactly as she'd hoped. The logistical matters of enrolling in community college and securing accommodation have all gone according to plan, and Marilyn relishes the opportunity to return to academic work. However, this passage describes Marilyn's intense longing for her family, as she is unable to put the thought of them out of her mind even as she is focused on her studies. The disdain that she once felt about cooking eggs in the different styles that each member of her family prefers has

turned to a painful sense of longing for this act of love and togetherness.

Note, however, that even as Marilyn is haunted by thoughts of her family, she doesn't quite seem to feel guilty about leaving. Although she misses her husband and children fiercely, Marilyn still doesn't seem to feel that what she has done is wrong. This suggests that, although Marilyn loves her family, her resentment of the traditional role of a housewife is perhaps even greater than that love.

☝ It was a sign, Marilyn decided. For her it was too late. But it wasn't too late for Lydia. Marilyn would not be like her own mother, shunting her daughter toward husband and house, a life spent safely behind a deadbolt. She would help Lydia do everything she was capable of. She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose: helping it grow, propping it with stakes, arching each stem toward perfection... She buried her nose in Lydia's hair and made silent promises. Never to tell her to sit up straight, to find a husband, to keep a house. Never to suggest that there were jobs or lives or worlds not meant for her; never to let her hear doctor and think only man. To encourage her, for the rest of her life, to do more than her mother had.

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

After realizing that she is pregnant with Hannah, Marilyn decides to return home. When she first arrives back at the house, Lydia confesses that she “lost” the Betty Crocker cookbook (although this is a lie; Lydia actually hid it in her room). Rather than being angry, Marilyn interprets this as a “sign” that Lydia can grow up to have the science career that now seems permanently out of Marilyn’s reach. She decides to encourage Lydia toward “perfection” in a way that she believes Doris never did for her. However, Marilyn’s words highlight her hypocrisy. She promises not to “be like her own mother,” but by projecting her own ambitions onto Lydia, she is guilty of the exact same parenting style as Doris—just with a different goal in mind.

This passage is useful in demonstrating the way in which the harmful burden Marilyn places on Lydia originates with good intentions. Clearly, Marilyn loves Lydia, and wants her to have a happy and successful life. At the same time,

Marilyn herself is also reeling from her return from Toledo and the death of her personal ambitions of becoming a doctor. It seems that the only way Marilyn can console herself is by silently promising to “encourage” Lydia to live out the dreams that Marilyn cannot. By making this promise, however, she treats her daughter as more of a project or an object than a person in her own right, as illustrated by the comparison of Lydia to “a prize rose.”

☝ She followed him all the way to the lake and to the end of the little pier. The houses on the other side of the water looked like dollhouses, tiny and scaled-down and perfect. Inside, mothers were boiling eggs or baking cakes or making pot roasts, or maybe fathers were poking the coals in the barbecue, turning the hot dogs with a fork so that the grill made perfect black lines all over. Those mothers had never gone far away and left their children behind. Those fathers had never slapped their children or kicked over the television or laughed at them.

**Related Characters:** James Lee, Marilyn Lee, Nath Lee, Lydia Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

James has driven Marilyn back to Toledo to collect her belongings from the apartment she'd been renting, leaving Nath and Lydia with Mrs. Allen, who promptly falls asleep in front of the television, leaving the children to wander off to the lake unaccompanied. This passage describes what Nath and Lydia can see when they gaze across the lake—rows of “dollhouses” in which the children imagine happy families free of abnormality and strife. Note that this domestic happiness is imagined in terms of food, a recurrent theme throughout the book. Although making eggs and grilling hot dogs are simple, everyday acts, they represent the stability, care, and normalcy that are missing from Nath and Lydia’s lives.

The fact that the houses are on the other side of the lake emphasizes the notion that the Lees are barred from accessing this happiness and normalcy by a mysterious and powerful force. However, this distance also means that Nath and Lydia do not see the real truth of the lives of the people who live on the other side of the lake. Although the

houses look idyllic from a distance, this appearance could be deceiving. In all likelihood, the families in those houses may be suffering from similar problems to the Lees.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ *He must really hate Nath*, Lydia thought. *As much as Nath hates him*. She imagined them in class together all these years: Nath sitting close to the front, notebook out, one hand rubbing the little furrow between his eyebrows, the way he did when he was thinking hard. Utterly focused, oblivious to everything else, the answer right there, sealed inside his mouth. And Jack?

Jack would be sprawled in the back corner, shirt untucked, one leg stretched into the aisle. So comfortable. So certain of himself. Not worried about what anyone thought. No wonder they couldn't stand each other.

**Related Characters:** Lydia Lee, Nath Lee, Jack Wolff

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 191

### Explanation and Analysis

Lydia has decided to befriend Jack Wolff in an attempt to upset Nath. When she first strikes up a conversation with Jack, he is skeptical and confused that Lydia (whom he sees as innocent and prim) is asking for a cigarette and claiming she doesn't care about physics. Jack suggests that Lydia stay away from him in case he ruins her chances of getting into Harvard like Nath. Lydia interprets this as evidence that Jack hates Nath and she envisions the two of them sitting in class together. To Lydia, the two boys are opposites: Nath is smart, hard-working, and socially "oblivious," while Jack is a careless, confident bad boy.

Of course, in reality this is not true, yet Lydia fails to critically examine what lies beneath appearances. This is ironic, as she has just spent a whole conversation trying to persuade Jack that she is not as uptight and innocent as she seems.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ It happened so quickly that if she were a different person, Hannah might have wondered if she'd imagined it. No one else saw. Nath was still turned away; Lydia had her eyes shut now against the sun. But the moment flashed lightning-bright to Hannah. Years of yearning had made her sensitive, the way a starving dog twitches its nostrils at the faintest scent of food. She could not mistake it. She recognized it at once: love, one-way deep adoration that bounced off and did not bounce back; careful, quiet love that didn't care and went on anyway. It was too familiar to be surprising. Something deep inside her stretched out and curled around Jack like a shawl, but he didn't notice.

**Related Characters:** Jack Wolff, Lydia Lee, Nath Lee, Hannah Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 211

### Explanation and Analysis

Nath, Lydia, and Hannah are at the lake. Nath has been swimming, and Hannah has been sitting with Lydia on the shore while Lydia sunbathes. Jack comes to sit with Lydia, at which point Nath walks over and sits between them, behaving rudely to Jack and telling Lydia that she's burning. Meanwhile, a small droplet of water falls from Nath's hair into Jack's hand, and—although no one else notices—Hannah sees him tenderly kiss it. The fact that Hannah has been excluded and forgotten throughout her life has made her perceptive, especially to other people's feelings of unrequited desire for love.

This sets Hannah apart from the other characters; whereas their experience of marginalization makes them take out their own insecurities and disappointment on others, Hannah's isolation makes her feel closer and more sympathetic to those around her. In addition, while the other members of her family often misunderstand and misread other people's feelings, Hannah is able to recognize Jack's love for Nath with startling accuracy. On the other hand, her shyness prevents her from expressing this knowledge, and thus her sympathy with Jack remains confined to her own mind.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

“I am disappointed.” Marilyn’s head snaps up. “I thought you were different.” What she means is: *I thought you were better than other men. I thought you wanted better than that.* But James, still thinking of Marilyn’s mother, hears something else. “You got tired of different, didn’t you?” he says. “I’m too different. Your mother knew it right away. You think it’s such a good thing, standing out. But look at you. Just look at you.”

**Related Characters:** James Lee, Marilyn Lee (speaker), Doris Walker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 242

**Explanation and Analysis**

Marilyn has discovered James’ affair, and has been spitefully questioning him about Louisa. She even suggests that Louisa would make a “nice little wife” and says that Doris spent her life trying to make Marilyn into the kind of woman that Louisa is. The mention of Doris infuriates James, who points out how much of a “disappointment” he was to Marilyn’s mother. In this passage, both James and Marilyn speak about disappointment, but mean two completely different things. Crucially, Marilyn does not fully explain her reasons for feeling disappointed in James, instead silently thinking “I thought you were better than other men.” This allows James to convince himself that Marilyn’s disappointment is not rooted in his affair, but in his race.

James also assumes that because Marilyn is white, she does not really know what it means to stand out, and thus cannot be said to have truly desired it. To some extent, James’ words suggest that he preemptively pushed Marilyn away on account of his belief that she would eventually grow tired of him. In reality, Marilyn has not grown tired of being marked as “different” due to her interracial marriage, but rather she is demoralized by playing the role of housewife and learning that James has cheated on her regardless of her sacrifices for their family. To Marilyn, the fact that she and James have collapsed into gender stereotypes is the greatest disappointment of all.

“I didn’t care. I knew what I wanted. I was going to be a doctor.” She glares at James, as if he has contradicted her. “Then—fortunately—I came to my senses. I stopped trying to be different. I did just what all the other girls were doing. I got married. I gave all that up.” A thick bitterness coats her tongue. “Do what everyone else is doing. That’s all you ever said to Lydia. Make friends. Fit in. But I didn’t want her to be just like everyone else.” The rims of her eyes ignite. “I wanted her to be exceptional.”

**Related Characters:** Marilyn Lee (speaker), Lydia Lee, James Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 243

**Explanation and Analysis**

The argument that began about James’ affair has escalated into a discussion of why both James and Marilyn feel dissatisfied with their life together. James has accused Marilyn of not truly understanding what it feels like to be socially marginalized, and Marilyn has replied that she experienced marginalization constantly as a female science student at Radcliffe. In this passage, she argues that this exclusion didn’t matter to her, because she was so fixated on her goal of becoming a doctor. Her words suggest that she blames James not only for ruining her own ambitions, but also for ruining Lydia’s. James’ pressure on Lydia to “fit in” directly contradicted Marilyn’s desire for her to stand out as an exceptional student and future doctor.

For the first time, James and Marilyn acknowledge that the pressures they put on Lydia pulled her in completely different directions. Although they do not say so explicitly here, the implication of this is that they are in some way responsible for Lydia’s feelings of sadness and alienation and, by extension, for her death. However, while Marilyn positions herself as an innocent party who simply wanted the best for Lydia, this does not, of course, represent the whole truth. In reality, both James and Marilyn put unjust and unwarranted pressure on Lydia and both of them made Lydia feel as if there was no way to be herself without disappointing them.

“You loved so hard and hoped so much and then you ended up with nothing. Children who no longer needed you. A husband who no longer wanted you. Nothing left but you, alone, and empty space.”

**Related Characters:** Doris Walker, James Lee, Marilyn Lee

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 246

### Explanation and Analysis

Marilyn and James' argument has come to a dramatic conclusion and Marilyn has ordered James to leave the house. After he goes, Marilyn sits and thinks about all the years Doris spent alone before her death. Suddenly, Marilyn feels a strong sense of identification with her mother's isolation. Despite all the years of love, care, and work that both women put into their family life, both end up alienated from those closest to them.

Marilyn arguably exaggerates her own status as an innocent victim of her family's desertion here; it was, after all, she who abandoned her family before her family abandoned her. On the other hand, Marilyn's point about isolation speaks to more fundamental truths than just her own particular situation. Throughout the book, family life is shown to be more fragile than is commonly assumed, and Lydia's death (and its consequences) highlight how easily family ties can be broken, cutting members of a family off from one another.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☹️☹️ That long-ago day, sitting in this very spot on the dock, she had already begun to feel it: how hard it would be to inherit their parents' dreams. How suffocating to be so loved. She had felt Nath's hands on her shoulders and been almost grateful to fall forward, to let herself sink... Don't let me sink, she had thought as she reached for his hand, and he had promised not to when he took it. This moment, Lydia thought. This is where it all went wrong.

**Related Characters:** Nath Lee, Marilyn Lee, James Lee, Lydia Lee

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 273-274

### Explanation and Analysis

After learning about Jack's love for Nath, Lydia reaches a kind of breaking point. That night, at 2am, she sneaks out to the lake. While sitting on the dock, she thinks about the day when Nath pushed her into the water, concluding that "this

is where it all went wrong." Lydia's thoughts in this passage reveal a curious mix of perceptiveness and irrationality. On the one hand, Lydia has a sharp understanding of the way in which her parents' attention has been "suffocating," such that she has crumbled under the pressure of James and Marilyn's love. On the other hand, her interpretation that the day in which Nath pushed her into the lake was the single moment "where it all went wrong" is arguably naïve; as the book shows, the problems in Lydia's life originated decades before she was even born.

Lydia articulates two contradictory feelings about the prospect of "disappearing" into the lake; she feels relieved to disappear even as she also resolves to take Nath's hand and let him pull her to the surface. These conflicting feelings provide an insight into why—in only a few minutes from this scene—Lydia jumps into the lake and drowns herself. Part of her hopes to "stay afloat" using the support of her brother, as well as her own determination, to survive. However, throughout her life the lake seems to have been pulling her toward it, beckoning her with the temptation to escape everyone's attempts to control her life and to succumb to the mysterious power of the water.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☹️☹️ What made something precious? Losing it and finding it. All those times he'd pretended to lose her. He sinks down on the carpet, dizzy with loss.

Then he feels small arms curling round his neck, the warmth of a small body leaning against him.

**Related Characters:** Hannah Lee, Lydia Lee, James Lee

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 280

### Explanation and Analysis

After driving aimlessly to Toledo, James turns around and heads home. Once there, he finds no sign of Marilyn or Nath, only Hannah sitting alone in the living room. The two of them play a game that James used to play with Lydia where he holds Hannah on his back and pretends that he can't find her. In the midst of this game, James is overcome by the painful irony that he spent years playing that he had "lost" Lydia, only for that game to come horrifically true. His reflection about things becoming precious through being lost and found suggests that—even in the midst of the Lee's pain at losing Lydia—new and positive things may flourish in her absence. This sense of hope is symbolized by Hannah's

arms around James' neck.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Lydia is dead, but her family does not yet know this. It is May 3, 1977 and, at 6:30 am, Lydia has not shown up for breakfast. Lydia's mother Marilyn has marked Lydia's physics homework and placed it next to her bowl of cereal; Marilyn's husband James is already on the way to work. At home, Lydia's brother Nath yawns, and Lydia's sister Hannah remarks that Lydia is slow to come downstairs. Marilyn goes up to look in Lydia's room, and finds everything in its place but no sign of Lydia. Marilyn blinks, hoping Lydia will suddenly appear, but she does not. Back downstairs, Nath remarks that he heard Lydia's radio playing at 11:30 the night before, and Hannah asks if it's possible to get kidnapped at 16. When Marilyn reenters the kitchen, for a moment Nath thinks it is Lydia, even though Lydia's hair is black and Marilyn's is blond. "Defying genetics," however, Lydia has blue eyes, which is part of the reason why she is both of her parents' favorite child.

The family sees that the car is still in the driveway, though this doesn't tell them much, as last week Lydia failed her driver's test. It is now 7:30 in the morning and Hannah asks if they should still go to school. Marilyn instructs Nath to drive them there, and she assures her children that she will figure out what's happened to Lydia. After Nath and Hannah have left, Marilyn thinks of a time when Lydia was a baby and she burned her hand on the stove while Marilyn had her back turned. Marilyn remembers looking at Lydia and thinking, "What else have you been hiding?" She did not realize that her daughter could walk, and it shocked her that Lydia already had "secrets."

Marilyn calls the secretary at Lydia's high school to ask if Lydia is there. Though she is tenth grade, Lydia's first course of the day is an eleventh-grade physics class. While Marilyn waits, she thinks of a little girl who went missing a few years ago and was found suffocated inside a storage shed. After this happened, local parents were advised to check tight spaces and call the police immediately if they discovered their children were missing. The school secretary tells Marilyn that Lydia is not in class. Marilyn hangs up without replying.

*Opening the book with a character's mysterious disappearance is a classic trope of the thriller genre. There is a notable contrast between the innocent, ordinary scene of the family eating breakfast together and Lydia's sinister absence. This contrast builds tension and suspense. At the same time, particular details give a subtle insight into Lydia's life, such as the fact that her mother has left her marked physics homework next to her breakfast, the description of her blue eyes, and the comment that she is her parents' favorite. Although it is not yet clear how, these details are related to Lydia's disappearance and death.*



*Marilyn's recollection of the incident when Lydia burned her hand as a baby further raises suspense over what has happened to her daughter. Marilyn's reaction to seeing Lydia walk is strangely accusatory, as if the very fact that Lydia can walk is a secret that she has been sneakily "hiding" from her mother. At the same time, Lydia's sudden disappearance undoubtedly indicates that there is indeed something Marilyn doesn't know about her daughter.*



*Lydia is 16, and thus it is somewhat strange that Marilyn compares her case to that of a little girl who accidentally got stuck in a storage shed. The likelihood of that happening to someone Lydia's age is small, and this suggests that Marilyn still thinks of her daughter as younger and perhaps more innocent than she really is.*



Marilyn searches the house and thinks of a girl from her school who, when she was 12, disappeared and was found raped and strangled by the side of the road. Her mind jumps to famous murder cases that are currently dominating the media. Marilyn tries to reassure herself that “things like that don’t happen here,” “here” meaning the small college town of Middlewood, Ohio. Only 3,000 people live in Middlewood, and Marilyn thinks that even **Middlewood Lake** is “really just a glorified pond.” The narrator corrects her, emphasizing that the lake is both large and deep. Marilyn keeps looking through the house but finds nothing, and she dials James’ phone number.

So far, James’ day is still normal; he is sitting at his desk marking a student’s poorly-written essay for an introductory course. As each summer approaches, students begin to make less effort, and James feels frustrated. He’s 46 and tenured, but he is still sometimes not recognized as a member of faculty. Still, he finds some pleasure in surprising people with the fact that he’s a professor of American history. Louisa Chen, one of James’ graduate teaching assistants, enters and tells him that the papers she has just graded were also of poor quality. From the back, she looks like Lydia, although Louisa’s eyes are brown, not blue. She is the first Asian student that James has ever taught, which excited him when he first met her. However, when Louisa saw a photo of James’ family on his desk, she commented on the fact that Marilyn was not Chinese. James was disappointed—everyone else pointed this out, but he thought Louisa would be different.

Louisa remarks that the undergraduates in the course they are teaching don’t know much about geography, and James responds, “Well, this isn’t **Harvard**.” Louisa reassures him that he shouldn’t blame himself and that he is not wasting his life. James asks Louisa to stand still as he pulls a ladybug from her hair. At this moment, Stanley Hewitt enters and James, who hates him, bristles. Stan says he hopes he “isn’t interrupting anything,” and Louisa exits, blushing. James feels a violent surge of anger at Stan, which he lets out by crushing the ladybug. The narrator remarks that this is the last second of “ignorant calm” before much greater problems arise. At that moment, Marilyn calls and asks James to come home.

The police tell James and Nath that lots of teenagers run away from home, and that often teenage girls are angry with their parents without their parents realizing. Nath watches one of the officers touch Lydia’s **“Baby Soft” perfume** “as if cupping a child’s head.” The officers advise them that most teenage girls come home of their own accord within 24 hours. Suddenly, Officer Fiske remembers that Marilyn went missing 11 years ago and asks James to confirm if this is correct. James, embarrassed, replies that this was only a “miscommunication” and a “family matter.”

*There are multiple ways in which Marilyn’s beliefs about Middlewood do not match reality. First, her claim that “things like that don’t happen here” is intrinsically false; violence happens everywhere, even in the smallest and seemingly safest communities. Marilyn also perceives the lake as being smaller (and hence safer) than it really is. The narrator’s correction of her misperception suggests that the lake will play a significant—and perhaps sinister—role in the story.*



*Although James has a successful career, he remains frustrated and marginalized by the prejudice he experiences both in his professional and personal life. Despite having been born in America and having graduated from both a prestigious prep school and Harvard, James is perceived as an unqualified or illegitimate figure to be a professor of American history. Meanwhile, white people and even Lydia find it inappropriate that James is married to a white woman. No matter what James does, because of his race he will always be seen as an outsider in American society.*



*This scene demonstrates James’ intense feelings of bitterness about the world around him. His mention of Harvard evokes the fact that he completed his undergraduate and graduate studies there and was hoping to be hired as a professor in the history department, but he was ultimately rejected. He considers Middlewood and the people associated with it (such as Stan) to be unintelligent and aggravating. James’ relationship with Louisa is a contrast to this bitterness, and there are romantic overtones to their exchange.*



*There is a tension between ideas of innocence and guilt in this scene. On the one hand, Lydia’s “Baby Soft” perfume creates an impression of her as a totally innocent, youthful victim. At the same time, the police suggest that Lydia may have been angry with her parents and thus may have disappeared on purpose. This theory is arguably given more credibility by Officer Fiske’s mention of Marilyn’s disappearance.*



Downstairs, Hannah shows the policeman a photo from the past Christmas. Lydia was in a bad mood and Nath tried to cheer her up, but it didn't work, and Lydia is scowling in the picture. James tells the officers to use a different photo, so people don't think Lydia "looks like that all the time." James chooses a photo of Lydia from her 16th birthday; she is wearing lipstick and "looks like a model... having an improbably good time." James says they will make a flyer if she doesn't return by tomorrow, and that he is sure everything will be fine. Marilyn insists that Lydia would not have run away of her own accord, and asks worriedly if there's "some psycho kidnapping girls." Officer Fiske reassures her that this is highly unlikely and that in almost every case girls come home by themselves.

The police leave, after instructing James and Marilyn to write a list of Lydia's friends who might be able to help them discover where she is. Nath says nothing, but he knows these girls are not Lydia's friends. They sometimes spend hours with Lydia on the phone, but Nath knows this is only because they want Lydia's help with their homework. The only person Lydia has actually been spending time with is Jack Wolff, a boy who lives with his mother, Janet, on the same street as the Lees. Jack and Lydia drive around in his car while Lydia pretends to be at school. When Marilyn disappeared years before, Jack "humiliated" Nath; after Marilyn's return, Janet is still divorced and Jack continues to "run wild." Nath says nothing of Jack and Lydia's friendship because he doesn't want to admit that it is real.

James calls each of the friends on the list, but none of them have any idea where Lydia might be. Hannah sits under the table and touches Nath's toe with her own, but he doesn't react. James finishes calling the last friend, Karen Adler. Lydia talks about Karen all the time, and James used to hear her gossiping on the phone to Karen and her other friends. However, he is now becoming increasingly doubtful that Lydia's claims of spending time with these girls are true. James calls Officer Fiske and tells him that no-one Lydia "knows from school" has any idea where she is; Fiske tells him they will send an officer to look for Lydia. Dinnertime comes, but the family doesn't eat anything. James tries to stay cheerful, but is unconvincing.

*Already it is becoming clear that both James and Marilyn are in a state of denial about their daughter's true nature. Rather than using the photo Hannah suggests, James chooses one that shows Lydia as more glamorous and happy than she truly was. Meanwhile, Marilyn refuses to believe it is possible that Lydia chose to run away, even though this is statistically far more likely than the possibility that she was abducted by a "psycho." While what really happened is still unclear, the tension between James and Marilyn's opinions and those of the police suggests that the truth may be difficult to uncover.*



*James and Marilyn's impression of Lydia's life is being rapidly exposed as wildly inaccurate. Already it is clear that Lydia's parents believe that her life is much happier and more innocent than is really the case. Yet, although Nath knows more about the reality of Lydia's life, he too refuses to openly acknowledge this truth. In different ways, all members of the Lee family are invested in maintaining the appearance of happiness and normalcy, even if this obstructs their chances of finding Lydia.*



*The image of Hannah sitting under the table ignored by her family becomes a visually symbolic representation of the older Lees' ability to ignore things they do not wish to acknowledge. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly impossible for James to ignore the fact that he has a false impression of Lydia's life. While the Lees make an effort to pretend that everything will be ok, the fact that they don't eat dinner highlights the extent to which their normal lives have been dramatically disrupted.*



Nath looks out his bedroom window at Jack's house and plans to sneak out to find him. He thinks back on the night before, the last time saw Lydia. He'd just come back from a four-day campus visit to **Harvard**, where he'd been thrilled by his first taste of college life. On returning home, he'd asked Lydia how the past few days had been and she'd barely replied. Meanwhile, Hannah is reading *The Sound and the Fury*, which she'd stolen from Lydia a few weeks before. The book is annotated with Lydia's notes from class, but only up until a certain point. The night before, Hannah had been lying in bed when she was awoken by a "soft thud" at 2am. She'd seen a slim figure walking across the front lawn and realized it was Lydia. Hannah imagined what life would be like if her sister left, how her parents favoritism of Lydia might transfer to Hannah. She thinks of her family's distress at Lydia's disappearance and how angry they would be if they knew Hannah didn't stop her from leaving—but as Hannah had watched, she didn't know where Lydia was going, or even really believe that she was leaving at all.

On Wednesday morning, James calls Officer Fiske again, but there is no news. Hannah and Nath stay home from school, but the family finds it difficult to do anything—watch TV, read, or even vacuum. That afternoon, a passerby notices that the rowboat used by the community is sitting in the middle of the **lake**. At night, the police call to ask if Lydia has ever "played with" the boat. James responds decisively that she hasn't; while James and Nath are both enthusiastic swimmers, Lydia refused to take lessons and has never gone more than ankle-deep in the lake. When James tells the police that Lydia can't swim, the meaning of his words give him a chill. The next day, the police find Lydia's body in the water.

## CHAPTER 2

The narrator claims that everything began with Lydia's parents and their own parents before them. Marilyn herself had once disappeared and she had always wanted to "stand out," whereas James wanted to "blend in"—both of which turned out to be impossible. In Marilyn's first year at **Radcliffe** in 1955, a professor asks why she wants to take physics, and Marilyn explains it is because she wants to be a **doctor**. The professor asks if Marilyn doesn't really want to be a nurse. However, Marilyn was the top of her high school class in physics on every test, and based on these grades the professor allows Marilyn to "try chemistry—if you think you can handle it." In the lab, Marilyn is the only girl and is constantly harassed by men who insist on helping her with the experiments; however, by the middle of term she is once again at the top of the class.

*Both Nath and Hannah believe that they know more than the rest of the family about Lydia's disappearance, yet so far, both have chosen to keep this knowledge to themselves. Nath's theory that Jack is responsible is somewhat vague, based on Nath's own prejudice against Jack. Hannah, meanwhile, doesn't have a theory about Lydia's disappearance but she does have concrete evidence that her older sister left the house voluntarily in the middle of the night. The fact that Hannah fails to share this information with her parents or the police might appear irresponsible and frustrating. However, a lifetime of being ignored seems to have made Hannah less trusting of the validity of her own opinions. Rather than expressing her thoughts and feelings, she chooses to remain silent.*



*In a different context, the discovery of Lydia's body in the lake might point decisively to foul play. However, the clues about Lydia's death given so far—the fact that Hannah saw her walk away from the house, the presence of the rowboat, and Lydia's inability to swim—indicate that Lydia rowed to the lake voluntarily and alone. At the same time, this still leaves many questions unanswered. Why sneak out in the middle of the night? Why get in the rowboat, especially if she didn't like swimming?*



*Like Chapter 1, Chapter 2 opens with a mysterious claim, that Lydia's disappearance is connected to her family history. However, at this stage the connection between Lydia's family and her disappearance is unexplained, as is the connection between Marilyn's desire to "stand out," James' desire to "blend in," and the prejudice Marilyn experienced as a female student of science. What is clear is the connection between the prejudice Marilyn experiences as a woman and the prejudice James experiences as a Chinese-American professor at Middlewood College.*



In high school, Marilyn had asked her principal if she could take shop instead of home economics. Home ec was required of all sophomore girls, and Marilyn's mother, Doris Walker, was the teacher. Marilyn had been at the top of her class since sixth grade, but the principal still denied her request, telling her that she would find the shop equipment difficult to use and that she would be a "distraction" to the boys in the class. In home ec, Marilyn sulks and thinks about the phrase "keeping house." When Marilyn was three, her father left, but her mother continued to wear makeup at all times and changed outfits before dinner "even though there was no husband to impress." Marilyn purposefully messes up all her home ec assignments, and her mother warns her that she knows she is trying to "prove" something but that she will fail her daughter anyway.

Doris grew up eighty miles from Charlottesville and has never left her hometown. When Marilyn is admitted to **Radcliffe**, Doris tells her daughter how proud she is and assures her that she will meet "a lot of wonderful Harvard men." It always bothers Marilyn that her mother ended up being right about this. At Radcliffe, Marilyn remains intensely dedicated to her academic work, stimulated by the vision of herself in a **doctor's** white coat. She is determined to make a life for herself that doesn't resemble her mother's in any way. However, in the beginning of her junior year she meets a man, "just as her mother predicted."

Marilyn sits in the lecture theatre of a popular new course called "The Cowboy in American Culture." The instructor is listed as James P. Lee, a fourth-year graduate student whom Marilyn expects to be Southern. However, when James walks into the room Marilyn is surprised to find that he is "Oriental." She has never seen an Asian person before and she is entranced by him. To Marilyn, James looks like "a little boy playing dress-up." She is surprised to hear that his accent is entirely American, unlike the racist stereotypes she has heard about how Chinese people speak. The students begin to leave, and one of them shouts "Yippee-ki-yay-ay!" as he walks out of the door. Although James does not seem to have noticed, Marilyn is desperately embarrassed on his account and squirms in her seat.

*Both Marilyn and her mother excel at what they do—Marilyn is a perfect student with a natural aptitude for academics, and Doris is an elegant, accomplished housewife who looks picture-perfect at all times. However, the extreme contradiction in the two women's ideas of success creates an unbridgeable tension between them. Marilyn is so determined not to fulfill her mother's ideal that she purposefully aims to receive a bad home economics grade. This act suggests that rebelling against one's parents can sometimes risk turning into an act of self-sabotage.*



*Marilyn is disdainful of her mother's comment about Harvard men on account of the fact that Marilyn wants to live a life that is impressive in its own right, not because it is oriented around a man. However, Marilyn's irritation ignores an important truth—the fact that Doris herself no longer has a man in her life. Whereas Marilyn seems set up to have both an impressive career and a husband, Doris is left with neither.*



*Outside of her exceptional talent and dedication to science, Marilyn has led a decidedly ordinary, small-town life. Her lack of experience of the wider world is made clear by the fact that she has never seen an Asian person before and thus only knows about Asian people through racist stereotypes. To some extent, her attraction to James can be understood as being based on his difference from anyone she has known before. Dissatisfied with the conventional world of her mother and her Virginia hometown, Marilyn is drawn to James as someone who "stands out."*



After the lecture, Marilyn goes to James' office hours and nervously introduces herself. She explains that she is pre-med, and asks if history was his favorite subject in school. James asks Marilyn why she is there and she responds that she wants to apologize for the boys who shouted in lecture. As they talk, Marilyn notices that his eyes are brown and that he has the body of a swimmer. James tells her that his favorite subject in school was paleontology, and suddenly she leans over his desk to kiss him. During the next lecture, Marilyn blushes and avoids catching James' eye. She'd "surprised herself" by kissing him, but had felt a sudden impulse to do it because she felt that James understood "what it's like to be different." Although he would never admit this to Marilyn, James had not noticed her during the first lecture; however, this is precisely what appeals to him about her—the fact that she "blended in so perfectly."

At the end of the second lecture, James asks to speak with Marilyn. He reminds her that he is her teacher, and that it would therefore be inappropriate for him to have a romantic relationship with her. Marilyn is embarrassed, and she thinks of her insistence that she did not come to Radcliffe to find a "Harvard man" but rather "for something better." However, the next day Marilyn informs James that she has dropped the class, and soon they spend all their time together. Though James is outwardly reserved, Marilyn likes how she is able to make him feel at ease. Being with Marilyn makes James feel "at home" in a way that he has never experienced before. Although he was born in the United States and has never left, James has never felt accepted as an American.

When James' parents immigrated to the United States, they had to do so under a false identity, as all Chinese immigrants except the children of American citizens had been banned. While most Chinese immigrants settled in California, James' parents moved to Iowa to work in the kitchen of a small boarding school. They were eager to take the position due to the fact that the children of school employees could attend the school for free if they passed the entrance exam. In hindsight, James realizes that the school had no intention of admitting the students of the children of unskilled employees, who they assumed would not have a chance of passing the entrance exam. However, at only six years old James was exceptionally gifted and a voracious reader, and thus he passed the exam. James was the first Asian student to attend Lloyd, and he was harassed and bullied by the other students. He avoided his parents, unsuccessfully trying to pretend that he was like everyone else.

*Marilyn believes that she and James have a connection because of a shared trait—they are both "different." However, James has a totally different impression of Marilyn; when he looks at her, he sees someone who fits into the Harvard-Radcliffe community. Both James and Marilyn feel an instant attraction to one another, but for totally different reasons. Furthermore, Marilyn likes something in James that he doesn't like in himself, and vice versa. Thus, even though the beginning of their love story is pleasant and romantic, it nonetheless paves the way for future misunderstanding and miscommunication.*



*As young people, both James and Marilyn have a very specific set of expectations of what they want out of life. Both want to achieve professional success, but, whereas James wishes to find social acceptance in American society, Marilyn wishes to be a pioneer as a female doctor. Although it is not quite clear to either of them yet, these ambitions are ill-fated and incompatible. Both James and Marilyn wish to fight against aspects of their identities that they cannot change (race and gender), which dooms them to eventual disappointment.*



*The story of James and his family is a marked contrast to more positive narratives of immigration and the American dream. On the surface, James' parents have achieved exactly the kind of life that immigrants to the United States dream of—both have secure jobs that allow their son to receive a prestigious education. However, this superficial narrative masks the reality of James' life, which is defined by a constant sense of alienation. Rather than being welcomed into the "melting pot" of America, James is made to feel ashamed of his race and the fact that his parents are low-skilled workers.*



James attends Lloyd for 12 years, yet fails to make any friends. He hopes his social life will improve at **Harvard**, but it does not; after 7 years as an undergraduate and then graduate student, James still has no friends and he feels like an imposter. This changes, however, when he meets Marilyn. On the first afternoon they spend together in bed at his apartment, he feels that their bodies fit together “as if they were two halves of a mold.” James loves Marilyn’s “honey-colored” hair and her “easy laugh.” However, he worries that he has been too lucky in finding her and he fears that she will “disappear.” James cuts his hair and buys clothes he thinks Marilyn will like, and the two of them paint his apartment yellow.

At Thanksgiving, Marilyn decides not to go home. She claims that it’s too far, but, in fact, she worries about what she would (or wouldn’t) tell Doris about her relationship with James. Marilyn explains to James that Doris is a home ec teacher and that “**Betty Crocker** is her personal goddess.” James has told Marilyn that his parents worked at a school, but failed to specify that they were cafeteria workers. He stopped speaking Chinese to his parents in the fifth grade due to his fear that it would taint his American accent. He tells Marilyn that his parents are dead, which is true. Both of them have a kind of pact not to ask too many questions of each other.

In the spring, James waits to hear if he will be hired into **Harvard’s** history department. The head of the department has hinted that James is at the top of his graduate class, and, although James has interviewed for positions at other Ivy League schools, he feels confident that he will be hired at Harvard. Meanwhile, Marilyn makes plans to attend medical school, calculating how far each university will be from James in Cambridge. However, in April James is told he has not been given the position at Harvard, and he is forced to accept a job at “humble Middlewood College” instead. Meanwhile, Marilyn is pregnant, and, because of that, she plans to marry James instead of heading to medical school. She reassures James that the baby will be “so much better” than their original plan, although she secretly tells herself that when the child is older, she will finish her studies and become a **doctor**.

Marilyn phones Doris and tells her that she and James are getting married. She explains that James is just finishing his PhD in American history, and her mother is thrilled. Marilyn feels relieved, thinking that she has “done just what her mother had hoped.” She explains that the wedding will be a small ceremony; Doris leaves Virginia for the first time to attend. When James and Marilyn meet Doris at the train station, Doris looks at James in shock. That night at dinner, Doris asks Marilyn if she’s sure James isn’t using their marriage to get a green card. Marilyn, furious, tells her mother that James was born in California.

*Marilyn helps to ease James’ feelings of being an outsider. To him, she symbolizes all of American society embracing him and finally making him feel welcome. However, this is clearly too much pressure to place on one person, and thus James fears the prospect of Marilyn disappearing. Although this accurately foreshadows the events that take place later in their lives, Marilyn does not disappear for the reasons James imagines. James’ irrational fears turn out to be accurate, but not in the way he initially believes.*



*Even at the honeymoon stage of James and Marilyn’s romance, their relationship is dominated by secrets, dishonesty, and silence. This is not necessarily because the two don’t trust each other, but rather because of all the ways in which their relationship—and they themselves—are at odds with the world around them. While James is ashamed of the fact that his parents are working-class immigrants, Marilyn wishes to keep a distance between herself and her highly traditional mother.*



*Both James and Marilyn’s ambitions have been significantly disrupted, but this does not at first register as a disaster. They reassure each other that their dreams are still in reach, but that their lives will simply take a slightly different course. However, there is an important difference between what Marilyn and James say out loud to one another and what they are privately thinking. Both are under pressure to embrace this new turn of events, which leads them to hide their true feelings from one another. As the rest of the narrative reveals, this duplicity and secrecy comes to have a devastating impact on their relationship.*



*Although Marilyn abhors Doris’ ideas and expectations of what her daughter’s life should involve, she still wishes to please Doris on some level. When it seems that Doris will approve of her marriage to James, Marilyn is thrilled—only to be heartbroken when Doris’ happiness turns to disapproval. Doris, who is invested in maintaining the appearance of pleasantness, does not express her racist views outright, but rather mentions them in an indirect (though equally offensive) way.*



On the day of the wedding, Doris takes Marilyn aside to “touch up [her] lipstick.” Doris is already upset that Marilyn is wearing a cream dress instead of a white one and that the ceremony is not at a church. She tells Marilyn “it’s not right” and says that she will regret marrying James. She urges Marilyn to think of her future children, saying “you won’t fit in anywhere.” Marilyn storms out of the bathroom, and when James asks what’s wrong she replies with a laugh that Doris wants her to marry “someone more like me.” Marilyn kisses James, thinking that her mother is being ridiculous. Only days before, Richard and Mildred Loving were married in Virginia, and in four months they will be arrested for breaking miscegenation laws. James and Marilyn’s wedding takes place. It is the last time that Marilyn ever sees her mother.

*One of the main ideas in the book is that, no matter how much people try to rebel against their parents, there is always an extent to which everyone fulfills their parents’ expectations, fears, and desires (whether they want to or not). On one level, Marilyn fulfills her mother’s dream that she will marry a “Harvard man” and become a housewife. At the same time, her mother’s racist assumption that Marilyn’s mixed-race family will not “fit in anywhere” also turns out to be correct. Try as they might to resist, many people’s fates are predetermined by their parents.*



### CHAPTER 3

On the day of Lydia’s funeral, Marilyn thinks of how she would have wanted the last moment she saw her daughter to have been different. Marilyn should have been “elderly and content”—on her deathbed, the last face she’d want to see would be Lydia’s, not those of her husband or other children. In reality, however, James has insisted on a closed-casket funeral, which means that Marilyn does not get to see Lydia “one last time.” James has not been able to tell Marilyn that when he identified Lydia’s body, only half her face was left, the rest having been “eaten away.” On the way to the cemetery, Marilyn turns her head to avoid looking at the **lake**, and Nath and Hannah wonder if she will do this for the rest of her life.

*This passage evokes profound questions about what—and how—we choose to see. When Marilyn last sees Lydia, she doesn’t really “see” her in the sense that she doesn’t see the reality of Lydia’s life. Meanwhile, James’ insistence on a closed casket might at first seem like an attempt to deny the truth of Lydia’s death, when really the fact that Lydia’s face is half eaten away indicates that there are some sights that are actually too terrible to behold. Finally, Marilyn’s refusal to look at the lake confirms that she is in a state of denial.*



School has been closed for Lydia’s funeral, and many of her classmates are in attendance. James and Marilyn barely recognize Karen Adler or Lydia’s other “friends,” as it has been years since they last saw them. Like Lydia, James and Marilyn have no real friends; even their neighbors “feel like strangers.” James and Marilyn don’t recognize most of the people there except Janet Wolff, who wears a black suit instead of her usual **doctor’s** white coat. Louisa Chen is there, along with a few professors from Middlewood. Although the Lees do not attend church, the funeral is led by a minister who reads a psalm. Hannah refuses to look at the coffin; she knows that Lydia’s body is in there, but wonders where Lydia herself is. Nath notices Jack Wolff out of the corner of his eye and imagines violently interrogating him. When he turns back, the coffin is already in the ground, and he is shocked by the realization that he’d missed the lowering and that Lydia is truly gone. He then notices Jack staring at him.

*Each person attending Lydia’s funeral has a totally different set of emotional responses to the occasion. James and Marilyn are reminded of their own isolation, as well as how little they really knew about their daughter’s life. Hannah, still only 11, contemplates the meaning of death with no real guidance or support from the rest of her family. Finally, Nath is consumed by a sense of tension between himself and Jack. He is convinced that only he knows about Jack’s involvement in Lydia’s death, and that he cannot rely on anyone else to discover this truth. He is so fixated on this that he misses the moment when Lydia’s coffin is lowered into the ground, a fact that symbolizes how his obsession with Jack’s guilt means he “misses” the truth.*



Nath has been given permission to take the final three weeks of the semester off, which means he will likely never see his classmates again. As the funeral goes on, Nath confronts Jack about why he is there. Jack asks how Nath is doing and says he is sorry about Lydia, to which Nath aggressively responds, "Are you?" As Jack turns to leave, Nath grabs his arm and tells him that the police want to talk to him, and that he knows Jack was with Lydia on Monday night. Their conversation is interrupted, however, by the approach of James, Marilyn, and Janet. James hisses at his son, asking why he is "picking a fight" at Lydia's funeral. Nath insists that Jack "knows something" about Lydia's death, but James is dismissive, telling his son to leave it to the police. Hannah tries to hold Marilyn's hand for the second time during the funeral, but she is ignored.

James angrily tells Nath that he is driving Marilyn and Hannah home, and that when Nath has calmed down he should walk. Secretly, James wishes to comfort his son, but the intensity of his own emotions means he feels unable to do so. He takes Hannah's arm, thinking that she "at least always does what she's told." Nath sulks, thinking that James doesn't know what Jack is really like. At school, Jack has a reputation for "deflowering virgins" unceremoniously in his car. Janet's job as a **doctor** means she works nights at the hospital, leaving Jack alone. At school, Jack is a loner, talking to no one except whichever girl he's decided to sleep with—including, that spring, Lydia. Nath sits in the graveyard for hours, thinking over all the rumors about Jack and trying not to visualize him and Lydia together.

When Nath finally goes home, he notices with satisfaction that there is a police car outside Janet and Jack's house. He decides to listen in to the conversation from the outside, thinking that as Lydia's brother he has a "right" to hear. Inside, Jack is explaining that Lydia was in his physics class because she skipped ahead. Janet explains that he was held behind because he failed physics the first time, but now has a B+, a fact that surprises Nath. Jack assures the police that he and Lydia were "just friends," and that he'd been teaching her to drive. He says the last time he saw her was on Monday afternoon, and that they'd been sitting in his car and smoking. The police ask Janet if this was when she was at the hospital, and Janet asks them to call her "Dr. Wolff," not Janet. Jack admits that "Lydia was always upset," and Nath thinks that Jack is to blame for this. However, Jack continues on to say that Lydia was upset by her grades, her parents, and her brother leaving for college.

*This scene provides many examples of characters willfully mishearing and misunderstanding each other. Nath is so convinced of Jack's guilt that he perceives his sympathy as insincere; meanwhile, Jack is so stunned that Nath is talking to him that he doesn't recognize Nath's accusatory aggression at first. James is embarrassed by his son's inappropriate behavior, and thus disregards Nath's claim that Jack was involved with Lydia's death. Finally, Hannah is so unseen and unheard by her family that it is as if she doesn't exist at all.*



*The contrast between James' relationship with Nath and his relationship with Hannah illustrates the way in which tensions between parents and their children build as the children grow older and develop lives of their own. James doesn't imagine that Hannah has a private world that she keeps secret from him (when in reality, of course, she does). Meanwhile, Nath does not consider telling his father about Jack's reputation, a fact indicative of the gulf that exists between the social world of teenagers and their parents—a gulf created by secrets and lies.*



*Nath is so angry about Jack's supposed responsibility for Lydia's death that Jack's statement that Lydia was "upset all the time" barely registers. If Jack only hung out with Lydia to have sex with her, it is unlikely he would know or care about her emotional wellbeing—indeed, all of Jack's statements in this passage contradict his reputation as a reckless, careless troublemaker. However, Nath has already privately determined that Jack is guilty, and thus he ignores this contradictory evidence. The police, meanwhile, have brought their own prejudices to the conversation, as indicated by the fact that they call Janet Wolff "Mrs." and seem to imply that she is neglecting Jack by working nights.*



Nath walks home and immediately goes up to his bedroom, purposefully avoiding his family. Marilyn and Hannah are also in their rooms. After the funeral, James is tempted to lie with his wife in bed, but instead he heads to his office, where he's kept his copy of Lydia's autopsy. It is lunchtime and the office is empty. Reading the autopsy, James thinks that it sounds like a school report rather than a scientific document. It indicates that there is no evidence of sexual trauma or foul play, and that Lydia died of "asphyxia by drowning." Whether this was a murder, suicide, or accident has yet to be determined. James reads the medical description of Lydia's dead, waterlogged body, and feels himself trembling. He doesn't want Marilyn to ever know these details about their daughter's body.

Louisa knocks on James' office door, still in the outfit she wore to the funeral. She gently takes the autopsy from his hands and tells him he shouldn't be at the office. James tries to respond, but he can't make a sound. Louisa tells him that she will cook him lunch at her apartment. After opening her front door, however, Louisa leads him straight into her bedroom. James notes that everything about her body is "different" than Marilyn's. After they have sex, James falls into a deep sleep for the first time since Lydia's disappearance. Meanwhile, at home, Marilyn tries to fall asleep but can't. Eventually, she walks into Lydia's room, which still smells of her—not of the **Baby Soft perfume** or the cigarettes Lydia used to claim Karen smoked, but of Lydia herself.

The objects in Lydia's room remind Marilyn of who she hoped Lydia would be as an adult. Lydia had wanted to be a **doctor** since she was a child, and her scientific books, poster of Marie Curie, and science fair ribbons now serve as a reminder of that dream. Almost every one of these items was a gift from Marilyn to her daughter. Marilyn spots a series of diaries she gave to Lydia each year as a Christmas gift. When she told Lydia to write her secrets in them, Lydia had responded that she didn't have any secrets. Suddenly overcome with a desire to understand both Lydia's life and death, she takes the most recent year's diary from the shelf and opens the lock. Every single page of every diary is blank.

At Louisa's apartment, James awakens with a start and hastily gets dressed. He tells Louisa "Goodnight" and rushes out to his car. Back at home, Nath continues to stare at Jack's house through the window, and Hannah replays the events of the day in her mind. She wraps her arms around herself, pretending that she is hugging her mother. Meanwhile, Marilyn stands in Lydia's room, promising herself that she will find out what happened to Lydia and who is to blame.

*Each member of the Lee family has retreated into their own private world of mourning, the first sign of how Lydia's death is further fracturing her family. While the male members of the family both have an urgent sense of personal responsibility to understand Lydia's death, Hannah and Marilyn take a less active role. Meanwhile, the lack of communication between James and Nath means that they do not even realize that they are both searching for clues simultaneously, albeit in very different ways.*



*The sexual encounter between James and Louisa throws ideas about guilt and innocence into question. Ordinarily, when a professor engages in a sexual situation with a student, the professor is seen as being at fault for taking advantage of their position (indeed, this is why James initially tells Marilyn they cannot date when she is enrolled in his class). On the other hand, during this scene James is in an exceptionally vulnerable position and Louisa clearly takes control over the act of seducing him. To what extent is either of them to blame for what takes place?*



*Even before the reader knows Lydia's true feelings about being a doctor, it is clear that Marilyn has relished the chance to live out her own dreams through her daughter. Indeed, the fact that all of Lydia's science-related belongings were gifts from her mother casts doubt on how much Lydia chose this passion for herself. Now that Lydia has died, Marilyn's dreams of becoming a doctor have died a second time. Meanwhile, the blank diaries mean that Lydia herself remains a complete mystery.*



*Again, each member of the Lee family is left to deal with their grief in total isolation. To each of them, Lydia's death has a totally different meaning and has provoked a markedly different emotional response. While Nath and Marilyn insist on finding someone to blame, James and Hannah desire intimacy and comfort in the arms of others.*



## CHAPTER 4

Back when Lydia is five and Hannah is not yet born, Middlewood College has a Christmas party that Marilyn is reluctant to attend. For the first time, both of her children are at school; at only 29, she feels it is possible that she might return to her studies. At the same time, the idea of studying seems incompatible with the reality of her life as a wife and mother. She is irritated by the knowledge that her life turned out exactly how Doris wanted. James insists that they go to the Christmas party, as he is up for tenure and “appearances matter.” They ask a neighbor, Vivian Allen, to watch the children. At the party, Marilyn meets a chemistry professor named Tom Lawson; while he explains his area of focus, Marilyn asks if he needs a research assistant, explaining that she studied chemistry at **Radcliffe** and hopes to go to medical school. Tom is surprised, but says that as long as James doesn’t mind he would be happy to discuss it in the New Year.

James is not keen on the idea of Marilyn working for Tom; he thinks it will make it seem as if he is not earning enough himself. James assures Marilyn that when he gets tenure they’ll have “all the money they need,” but Marilyn secretly keeps Tom’s number. In April, Marilyn gets a call informing her that Doris has died. Marilyn has not spoken to her mother since her wedding day, and she never told Doris about the births of Nath or Lydia. When she tells James about Doris’ death, she makes it clear that she doesn’t want to discuss it. Marilyn drives to Virginia to pack up her mother’s house and arrange the burial. She is surprised by the extent to which Doris’ house still feels like home to her.

Marilyn finds many photographs of herself as a child, but none of her mother. There is no evidence of Doris’ existence at all except her beloved **Betty Crocker cookbook**. Marilyn takes note of which passages her mother chose to underline, all of which instruct the reader on how to show people love through cooking. The book argues that all wives should know their husband’s preferred style of **egg** and that there is no “deeper sense of satisfaction” than having an organized, well-stocked kitchen. Marilyn feels an intense sense of pity for her mother, who wanted nothing more than to dedicate her life to her family, and who ended up alone. Marilyn feels “furious at the smallness of her mother’s life” and resolves that the cookbook is the only object in the house that she will keep as a memory of Doris.

*The fact that Marilyn meets Tom Lawson at the Middlewood Christmas party is important. Marilyn is initially reluctant to go because the event forces her to play the role of “faculty wife,” thereby underlining the fact that she gave up her own education through her marriage to James. It is also a highly superficial event, as is made clear when James emphasizes that “appearances matter.” Although Marilyn’s conversation with Tom Lawson seems promising, Tom’s surprise at Marilyn’s interest in science and his insistence that they will have to ask James if he doesn’t mind are reactions that do not bode well for Marilyn’s ability to escape her role as a wife in order to return to academics.*



*Doris’ death takes place during a pivotal time for Marilyn. Her children are in school and she has made preliminary arrangements to return to her own academic path. For the first time since her marriage, her original goal of becoming a doctor is once again in sight. In a way, Doris’ death ensures that, after eight years, Doris intrudes again on Marilyn’s life in order to shape her destiny. Even in death, Doris becomes a kind of ghost obstructing Marilyn’s ambitions.*



*Marilyn has a complex emotional reaction to the experience of searching through her mother’s belongings. She is clearly saddened by the extent to which Doris ended up isolated and alone, her one dream in life unfulfilled. On the other hand, Marilyn feels little (conscious) guilt over having ceased communicating with her mother. Instead, she blames the tragedy of her mother’s life on the fact that Doris chose the wrong ambition, one that—in Marilyn’s view—is inherently “small” and unfulfilling.*



The next morning, Marilyn calls a company that will remove the rest of Doris' belongings. Marilyn wonders where all of Doris' things will go, and concludes that it is the same place that people go after death—"on, away, out of your life." Once empty, the house no longer feels familiar to Marilyn. Driving home, Marilyn stops on the side of the road in West Virginia. She is haunted by the house's empty rooms and the **Betty Crocker cookbook** on the seat next to her. She thinks of her own life and how it is "possible to spend so many hours cooking **eggs**," each family member getting them in their favorite style. Marilyn steps out into the rain and promises that she will never become like her mother.

Back in Middlewood, James is unable to cook **eggs** properly for the children, who constantly ask when Marilyn is coming home. James takes Nath to the Y, leaving Lydia—who hasn't yet learned to **swim**—with Mrs. Allen. James has been looking forward to spending time alone with his son and he dreams that in high school Nath will be the "star" of the swim team. James encourages Nath to swim with the other children; when Nath expresses reluctance to do so, James becomes angry. The only kid Nath recognizes is Jack, who is a strong and confident swimmer. James has heard Mrs. Allen gossiping about how Janet leaves Jack alone while she works at the hospital, but now he daydreams about Jack and Nath becoming best friends.

James notices that Nath is "It" in a game of Marco Polo, but that the children are quickly deserting him and getting out of the **pool**. Nath is still calling out "Marco" when an older girl shouts, "Chink can't find China!" James panics, wondering what he should do. At that moment, Jack shouts out "Polo!" and Nath swims toward him—yet when Nath sees that the other kids are out of the pool and Jack is smiling, he believes that Jack is taunting him and hurries out of the pool. In the locker room, Nath furiously kicks a locker while Jack looks on silently. James wants to hug and reassure Nath, telling him that he understands how he feels and that the same kind of thing happened to him at Lloyd. However, another part of James wants to slap his son, urging him to find a way to fit in.

*This scene emphasizes that Marilyn's reaction to her mother's death is somewhat selfish. Rather than focusing on any sense of loss or guilt over Doris, Marilyn fixates on her own life and its alarming similarity to her mother's. While both Doris and her belongings have disappeared from Marilyn's life, the legacy of Doris' existence haunts Marilyn with an increasingly desperate intensity. Marilyn's promise to herself suggests that she feels that if she doesn't act now, it will be too late.*



*There is a distinct contrast between Nath's shy reluctance to get in the water and Jack's "cocky" confidence as a swimmer. This contrast extends to the parenting styles of James and Janet—where Janet is scorned in the neighborhood for leaving Jack alone, James plays an active part in encouraging Nath to join the other children in the water. This suggests that a "hands off" style of parenting may encourage children to feel a greater sense of confidence than the children of parents who actively push them toward certain ambitions.*



*It is painfully ironic that in hoping Nath does not experience the same isolation and alienation that he himself felt, James totally isolates and alienates his son. Not only does Nath feel excluded by the other neighborhood children, he does not feel comforted and supported within his own family. It is clear that James struggles with how to react to Nath being bullied; although from the outside it may seem obvious that he makes a cruel and counterproductive choice, reliving the experience of his own racist marginalization seems to paralyze James.*



Back at home, James wants to comfort Nath but feels that telling him “it gets better” would be a lie. When Marilyn comes home, James dismissively tells her that Nath was teased by kids at the **pool** and that he “needs to learn to take a joke”—intentionally omitting any mention of the racist language. Nath, meanwhile, furiously asks his mother for a hard-boiled **egg**, which causes her to burst into tears. Marilyn remains in a terrible mood all day and refuses to cook anything, instead serving pre-prepared food. The next morning, she calls Tom Lawson and asks if he’d like to discuss working together. Tom admits that he assumed she wasn’t serious, given her family obligations, and that he has already hired an undergraduate. Without saying anything, Marilyn hangs up.

Marilyn gets in the car and starts driving away, telling herself she needs to “clear her head.” She circles the **lake** twice before driving through Middlewood to the hospital. She sits in the waiting room, watching the **doctors** and nurses hurry past. Janet emerges and Marilyn doesn’t recognize her until a nurse calls “Dr. Wolff.” Marilyn is astonished; she knew Janet worked in the hospital but she had assumed Janet was a secretary, not a doctor. Marilyn thinks of the **Betty Crocker cookbook** and asks herself how Janet has done it. She remembers that Janet doesn’t have a husband and thinks that if she, Marilyn, did not have a husband or children, then she might be a doctor now too. Tears stream down Marilyn’s face and Janet suddenly approaches, asking if Marilyn is alright. Marilyn assures her that she is fine.

The next night, Marilyn concocts an elaborate plan. She will take her mother’s savings and, after Doris’ house sells, the additional money from that. This will be enough to fund her for a year to finish her undergraduate studies, followed by four years at medical school. After dropping the children at school she drives to Toledo, enrolls at the community college, and signs a lease on a furnished apartment starting in two weeks’ time. Back in Middlewood, she rereads the **Betty Crocker cookbook** every night to remind herself of what she doesn’t want her life to be like. She tells herself that the children will be fine and she secretly packs up her college textbooks to bring with her. Marilyn makes a series of increasingly sumptuous meals and an enormous pink birthday cake for Lydia. She is amazed that no one has noticed the secret hiding beneath her cheerful smile.

*Each member of the Lee family has sunk into their own personal turmoil, and none is able to express their feelings to the others. James puts on a tough façade in order to conceal his sadness and disappointment over witnessing his son get bullied. Nath is humiliated and furious, and, in addition, he feels rejected by his father. Meanwhile, Marilyn is undergoing a secret crisis even more intense than that of her husband or son. Without expressing these negative feelings, they escalate beyond each of the characters’ control.*



*Even though Marilyn feels that her own life has been ruined by traditional gender roles and sexism, she has the same instinctive sexist prejudices as the more narrow-minded members of her community. She is so shocked to see Janet in her role as a doctor that she experiences a jarring moment of misrecognition. This is not the only evidence that Marilyn has reached a breaking point, however. The very fact that she has driven to the hospital for no reason highlights the extent to which she is in a desperate state, and it foreshadows her approaching disappearance from her family.*



*It is somewhat remarkable that Marilyn is so capable of living out her normal life while concealing the enormous secret that she is about to abandon her family. On the other hand, throughout the novel, family life is shown to be characterized by secrecy, silence, and dishonesty. Is there any substantial difference between the secret Marilyn keeps and the secret of James’ affair or Lydia’s lie about her friendships? Perhaps what is most striking about this scene is Marilyn’s lack of guilt over what will happen to the children. Although she insists that they will be fine with James, this seems like wishful thinking.*



That night, Marilyn tries to “memorize” James’ body as they have sex. James can tell something is wrong, and he tries to soothe her. The next morning, she keeps her eyes closed when James gets dressed, worried that she will cry again. She likewise avoids eye contact when kissing Nath and Lydia goodbye, but tells them to “be good.” After they go, Marilyn takes a barrette from Lydia’s room and a marble from Nath’s, along with a spare button from James’ coat. She is careful to choose things that they won’t miss, not wanting to “tear another hole” in their lives. She writes James a note telling him that she is not happy with her life and that it is not the life she imagined for herself. She says she knows they will be fine and asks for his forgiveness. However, she ultimately throws the note in the trash. When James gets home, he finds his children on the front step; Nath can only say one word: “gone.” Lydia, meanwhile, doesn’t say anything at all.

*As Marilyn is about to leave, it becomes clear that her cold insistence that her family will be fine without her does not mean she lacks an emotional attachment to them. Rather, Marilyn’s commitment to her original ambitions and dissatisfaction with the life of a housewife simply overrides the bond she has with her family. This is an usual narrative; particularly in the 1970s, mothers were conventionally understood to hold an unbreakable sense of duty and attachment to their children, and thus even the behavior of Janet Wolff is treated as unnatural and suspicious. Yet, unable to find a way to combine her career ambitions and family, Marilyn is forced to choose between them.*



## CHAPTER 5

During Hannah’s life, the Lees have never discussed Marilyn’s disappearance, and thus Hannah has no idea that it happened. After Lydia’s death, Hannah feels confused and angry. She wants to ask Lydia what it was like to disappear into the **lake**. On what would have been her last day of school, Hannah lies awake before sneaking out at 2am, something she’s been planning for weeks. As she creeps across the front lawn, she imagines Lydia doing the same thing and witnessing the same sights of their neighborhood at night. In the distance, she can see the glimmer of the lake. Hannah plans to row out just as Lydia did, but when she gets closer she sees that the boat is gone. She lies down on the dock and looks up at the stars. If everything were normal, she and her siblings would have spent time on the lake; Lydia would cover herself in baby oil and James and Nath would swim. Now, they will never go to the lake again. No one talks about Lydia, and Hannah feels overwhelmed by how little she still understands about her death.

*Unable to express her feelings verbally and ignored by her family, Hannah resorts to acting out the thoughts in her mind. In doing so, Hannah physically follows in her sister’s footsteps. In the rest of the book, the notion that children’s destinies are determined by their parents and older siblings is shown in a more metaphorical way, but here it becomes literal. By sneaking out of the house, Hannah continues a secret tradition that began with Marilyn’s escape to Toledo. At different moments and for different reasons, each of the female members of the Lee family have secretly escaped the family home in an attempt to resolve some of life’s most difficult questions.*



Back at home, Hannah goes into Lydia's room and retrieves a broken silver locket. She has promised Lydia she will never wear it, so instead she just rubs it in her hands. The bed still smells like Lydia, and Hannah resolves to come into her room every night. In the morning, the family argues over the fact that the chain is not on the door. Hannah repeats "I'm sorry I'm sorry" in her head, but says nothing aloud. Marilyn insists that Lydia would not have left on her own accord and that "some nutcase" must have kidnapped her. James sighs, wanting to argue that they could not have changed Lydia's fate with a more securely-locked door; however, he says nothing. In his office, he keeps a copy of the news article about Lydia's death. It mentions the fact that Lydia and Nath stood out as the only non-white students at school and that few students knew Lydia well. Since then, more and more articles have been published, mostly arguing that Lydia's death was likely a suicide.

James responds that he doesn't think a "nutcase" took Lydia. Just then, Officer Fiske arrives, and informs the family that they have spoken to Karen Adler and Lydia's other friends and that they all "barely knew her." James flushes with embarrassment as Fiske asks if Lydia was lonely, and cautiously mentions that she did spend a lot of time alone. Marilyn adds that Lydia was hard-working and busy with schoolwork. When Fiske asks if Lydia was unhappy, Marilyn immediately cuts him off, saying that she was "very happy" and "loved school." She insists that Lydia would not have gone out on the **lake** by herself and urges the officer to look for the "psycho" who must have kidnapped Lydia. Fiske promises that they are considering "all possibilities" and asks to speak to Nath.

Nath steps outside with Officer Fiske, thinking that if Lydia had been a "normal" teenage girl the police would have already understood what Nath knows—that Jack is to blame. Nath understands the narrative now emerging about Lydia: that she was lonely, struggling in school, from a strange family. However, he is convinced that this is wrongly obscuring Jack's role in her death. Fiske explains that he wants to speak to Nath because sometimes siblings understand things in a way that their parents don't. He asks Nath if Lydia ever snuck out by herself at night, and Nath replies she didn't. When asked if Lydia got along with her parents, Nath replies that she did. He is shocked by the officer's question about whether their parents ever hit her and insists that they didn't, that they "loved her." Nath likewise denies that Lydia ever spoke of self-harm. However, when Fiske asks if Lydia seemed sad the night she disappeared, Nath thinks of her silence at dinner and suddenly starts to cry.

*Outside of the Lee family, there seems to be a general consensus over the narrative that Lydia was a socially excluded loner and that her death was likely a suicide. Within the family, however, each person clings to their own wildly different interpretation of what happened to Lydia. Marilyn is desperate to place the blame on an external, irrational factor. Because Lydia was (supposedly) living out the dreams Marilyn had for herself, it is impossible for Marilyn to imagine that Lydia might have been unhappy. James, meanwhile, recognizes Lydia's loneliness as similar to his own, and thus he believes the interpretation that she committed suicide.*



*To some extent, James and Marilyn's understanding of Lydia's life is quickly unraveling. It is now beyond doubt that their impressions of her social life and friend group were entirely mistaken, and that Lydia must have been lying to them about how she spent her time. However, while James (reluctantly) accepts this fact, Marilyn aggressively clings to the ideas about Lydia's life that she held prior to her daughter's death. Even if this means imagining a "psycho" who raped and murdered Lydia, Marilyn still refuses to acknowledge reality.*



*The conversation between Nath and Officer Fiske again emphasizes the intensity with which people can cling to their own interpretation of events, even in the face of conflicting evidence. Unlike Marilyn, Nath understands the police's narrative about Lydia, and he is aware of how they interpret the evidence of her life circumstances. However, he is so convinced of Jack's guilt that he fails to consider whether the police's version of events might be closer to reality. Furthermore, Nath has a hard time reconciling his knowledge that James and Marilyn adored Lydia with the possibility that they might have had a negative effect on her. Did Lydia benefit from being the favorite child, or suffer because of it?*



Inside, Marilyn is furious at James for dismissing her suggestion that a stranger was involved in Lydia's death. James accuses her of being "hysterical" as a result of watching the news. Meanwhile, Hannah slips under the kitchen table, alarmed by hearing her parents fight for the first time. Marilyn balks at the suggestion that she is a "hysterical housewife" and says that at least she doesn't "kowtow to the police." Although Marilyn barely notices, her use of the word "kowtow"—taken from Chinese—strikes James as a humiliating racial insult. James leaves and Marilyn shuts herself in her bedroom. When Nath returns, Hannah explains that their parents have had a fight.

Without verbally agreeing to do so, both Nath and Hannah head to the **lake**. Meanwhile, James circles the lake in his car, replaying Marilyn's words in his mind and feeling a sense of responsibility for Lydia's unhappiness and death. He had planned to tell Louisa that he loves Marilyn and that they must never sleep together again, but instead falls straight into her arms the moment he sees her. In Louisa's bed, he is finally able to stop running the details of Lydia's death and its consequences through his mind. Meanwhile, Marilyn paces in Lydia's room, furiously replaying the conversation with the police in her mind. Lydia always seemed so happy and eager to please. Marilyn thinks back to the night Lydia died and wishes she'd hugged her and never let her go.

Marilyn cradles Lydia's book bag, inhaling the "precious" smell of school. Suddenly, Marilyn notices that inside the bag are an open pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a box of condoms. She drops the bag, thinking that these items must belong to someone else. However, she remains uncertain, and remembers the police asking her if Lydia had a boyfriend. She resolves to understand everything about Lydia and what happened to her. Meanwhile, by the lake, Nath wonders what happened to Lydia's body. Suddenly Jack appears on his way back from the high school graduation ceremony. Nath walks over to him, unsure of what he will do. Although he's never fought anyone, he imagines pinning Jack down and getting him to admit that Lydia's death was all his fault.

Hannah tries to stop her brother from approaching Jack, and, though Nath resists, she eventually drags him to his knees. Jack glances over and Nath is certain he sees fear in Jack's eyes. Nath pushes Hannah away, surprised by her strength. Hannah begs her brother not to fight Jack, and she asks why Nath is so angry with Jack. Nath tells her that he knows that Jack was involved with Lydia's death. He adds that Lydia fell in the lake before Hannah was born, when Nath was only seven. Hannah rests her head on Nath, expecting him to shoo her away, but he doesn't.

*James and Marilyn's argument makes clear that, as much as they are afflicted by the pain of losing Lydia, they are also suffering from the same insecurities, regrets, and conflicts that have dominated their lives even before having a family together. For James, Lydia's disappearance and Marilyn's anger amplifies his existing experience of racial prejudice and exclusion. For Marilyn, it emphasizes the extent to which her life has failed to turn out as she'd originally hoped.*



*It might seem strange that Nath, Hannah, and James are all drawn to the lake, considering it is both the location and cause of Lydia's death. As a vast and unknowable expanse of water, the lake symbolizes all that the family cannot know about Lydia's fate. It is therefore significant that while Nath, Hannah, and James choose to go to the lake, Marilyn will not even look at it. While the other family members are more aware of their own unanswered questions, Marilyn refuses to accept that she might be wrong.*



*Both Marilyn and Nath are caught up in fantasies about Lydia, her death, and its aftermath. In cradling Lydia's book bag, Marilyn reaffirms her own image of her daughter as a hard-working, wholesome girl whose future would have involved the realization of Marilyn's personal ambitions. Meanwhile, Nath has imaginatively positioned himself as a heroic redeemer of Lydia, punishing Jack for the wrongs he supposedly committed against her. In both these fantasies, Lydia is a decidedly passive, innocent victim.*



*This moment represents a turning point in Nath and Hannah's ability to communicate with each other. Rather than staying silent and removed as she usually does, Hannah aggressively prevents Nath from approaching Jack. This provokes Nath to open up to her and explain his suspicions about Jack, as well as reveal the long-held secret of the other time Lydia fell in the lake.*



## CHAPTER 6

The summer that Marilyn disappears is the same summer that Lydia falls into the lake. The Lee family never talks about this summer, but they cannot escape its haunting legacy. Every morning while Marilyn is gone, James calls the police to see if he can do anything more to help. However, Officer Fiske gently points out that Marilyn packed suitcases and took her keys, which suggests that she left voluntarily. Because of this, there is little that the police can do. However, James tells his children that the police are looking for Marilyn and that they will find her soon. At school, the other children gossip about Nath and Lydia's missing mother. Meanwhile, in reality, James knows that Marilyn left voluntarily; he found the scraps of her note in the trash and pieced it back together. He reads it ritualistically several times a day.

When James and Marilyn married, they made a pact to “forget about the past.” Now that Marilyn is gone, James thinks about the past obsessively and is haunted by Doris' opposition to their marriage. He reads Marilyn's note again and again, hoping that it will eventually hurt less, though it never does. He lets the children fall asleep in front of the TV before taking them upstairs and returning to sleep in the living room himself. He fails to make the children's sandwiches the way they like them. The family rarely leaves the house, and one day Nath begs to be taken to the **lake**. James refuses, saying he doesn't want to “play lifeguard” to Lydia, who can't yet swim. Nath angrily pinches Lydia's arm and calls her a “baby.”

On the way back from a trip to the grocery store, Mrs. Allen waves to James and says she hasn't seen him in a while. She asks after Marilyn, and James mentions that she is gone “indefinitely.” Inside, Nath asks what indefinitely means, and James urges him to forget what Mrs. Allen said, calling her a “silly woman.” He tells his children that Marilyn's absence is no one's fault, especially not theirs. The children know their father is lying. A month passes, and there is still no sign of Marilyn. One day, Nath spots Jack on the street. They haven't spoken since the incident at the pool, but Nath feels desperately lonely and sits still as Jack walks over. Jack offers Nath candy, reassuring him that he'll be ok. Jack says that Janet tells him children only need one parent and that if Jack's dad doesn't care enough to see him, “it's his loss, not mine.” Nath, embarrassed and furious, spits out the candy and tells Jack to shut up.

*What is arguably most significant about James' behavior after Marilyn's disappearance is the way it mirrors Marilyn's behavior after Lydia's death. Both refuse to believe that the person who has disappeared went willingly, and they obsess over the small pieces of evidence left behind. Perhaps the disappearance of a family member inherently provokes this state of denial. On the other hand, there is also a distinct similarity between Marilyn and Lydia's disappearances—both were escaping their lives.*



*The consequences of Marilyn's disappearance suggest that any attempt to forget the past will ultimately be fruitless. Even if people choose to remain silent and secretive about it, the past—and particularly the legacy of family—will always emerge and repeat itself in the present. Doris was left feeling purposeless and alone when Marilyn's father left, and now Marilyn inflicts the same fate on her own family in an attempt to avoid inheriting her mother's “small” life.*



*Nath's reaction to Jack's attempt at solidarity and comfort highlights how certain people come to feel marginalized and excluded. Jack's attempt at sympathy could have created a bond between the two boys based in their shared experience of having a parent leave the family. Nath might have been able to confide in Jack, expressing the feelings about Marilyn's disappearance that he isn't allowed to mention at home. Instead, Nath's own feelings of shame and anger provoke him to reject and humiliate Jack. Thus both boys are left in an even more isolated situation than they were in to begin with.*



A few days later, Nath is happily distracted by the launch of the *Gemini 9*. Nath is riveted and obsesses over the news coverage of the launch. He memorizes so many details about space travel that the reality of his own life fades from his mind. One Sunday, Nath asks James excitedly if he can believe that “people can go practically to the moon and *still come back*” and James slaps him. It is the only time that James ever hits one of his children, and after Nath runs out of the room James kicks the television to the ground. After this incident, Nath becomes even more committed to his passion for outer space.

Lydia, meanwhile, is plagued by torturous nightmares. The only reminder of Marilyn in the house is the **Betty Crocker cookbook**, which Lydia reads “with the adoration of a devotee touching the Bible.” Two months after Marilyn’s departure, Lydia curls up under the dining table to read the book again. It is the 3rd of July, but Lydia and Nath both know there won’t be any celebrations the next day. Looking at the book, Lydia notices that there are bumps over the pages that must have been caused by teardrops. She suddenly feels a strong sense of guilt for Marilyn’s disappearance, and tells herself that when her mother comes back, she will do everything she asks.

In Toledo, Marilyn is studying in preparation for her Organic Chemistry midterm. To her surprise, the other students at the community college treat Marilyn just like one of them, and she is thrilled by this feeling that she fits in. At the same time, Marilyn is often distracted by intrusive thoughts of her family. She misses them so much that she regularly calls the house, although when James picks up she never says anything. James answers no matter what time it is, and the one time he doesn’t answer Marilyn panics and rings every five minutes until he does. Once, Nath picks up and Marilyn is desperate to speak to him, but she still says nothing. James doesn’t tell the police about these phone calls, and he has been growing increasingly irritated by his suspicion that Officer Fiske thinks it was “only a matter of time” before Marilyn left him. Meanwhile, Marilyn tells herself that her phone calls prove that her family is doing fine without her.

*There are multiple explanations for why James hits Nath in this scene. Although stated innocuously, Nath’s words are a hurtful reminder that, while people can now come back from the moon, Marilyn still hasn’t come back to her family. Perhaps James is also jealous that Nath has found an interest that distracts him from the reality of Marilyn’s absence while James himself is left obsessively rereading her note.*



*The Betty Crocker cookbook is a symbol not only of the disconnect between Doris and Marilyn, but also the disconnect between Marilyn and Lydia. While Lydia clings to the cookbook as the only material reminder of her mother’s existence, the tears she sees on the page make her feel responsible for Marilyn’s disappearance. In both Lydia and Marilyn’s case, the words of the cookbook evoke a perfect, happy family, in contrast to which their own family appears decidedly inadequate.*



*Marilyn’s time in Toledo is characterized by two totally oppositional sensations. On one end, she is living out a dream that she has been harboring since she was a child, and she is thrilled by the feeling that she still belongs in an academic community. The fact that she has gone from Radcliffe to community college does not seem to bother her, and her desire to work hard is as strong as ever. In this sense, everything has worked out just as she’d hoped. However, in the midst of this joy and success, Marilyn remains inescapably tethered to her family. Although she is physically alone and independent, she cannot emotionally separate herself from James and the children.*



Marilyn feels a great sense of possibility in this moment, and she tries to dismiss thoughts of her family. However, while studying for the midterm she suddenly feels dizzy and faints. At first she thinks she's caught a bug, and then she realizes that she has not had her period since leaving home. She thinks that she might just be hungry, and goes to the store to pick up some food. While there, she falls to the ground, spilling her groceries and cutting her hand. She then goes to the hospital, where a young blond woman treats her hand. Marilyn asks if the **doctor** shouldn't be the one stitching her hand; the woman laughs and explains that she is the doctor. Marilyn is disappointed with her own prejudiced way of thinking. She confesses that she thinks she's pregnant.

The rest of Marilyn's time at the hospital passes in a blur. Someone asks for her husband's number, and Marilyn gives it unthinkingly. Suddenly James is there, holding her hand and telling her that the family has "missed her so much." Marilyn comes to the realization that her educational dreams are over and that she has no choice but to go home. Furthermore, she knows that once she is home she will not be able to bring herself to leave again. With a heavy sense of defeat, Marilyn tells herself to accept that "this is it." She leans her head against James and asks him to forgive her. James drives her back to Middlewood, anxiously checking on her throughout the journey.

When they arrive home, Lydia and Nath are at the kitchen table. James announces, "Your mother's home," even though the children can plainly see her in front of them. Both the children stare at Marilyn, weeping silently. Marilyn asks them if they have been good. Upon finding out that her mother would be coming home, Lydia decided to hide the **Betty Crocker cookbook**, and now she tells Marilyn that she "lost it." Marilyn puts her arm around Lydia, feeling proud of her; she thinks Lydia's loss of the cookbook is a "sign" that her daughter will reject traditional femininity and she vows to support and encourage Lydia to fulfill her potential. James has ordered pizza, and the family begins to eat. Nath lets out a "deep, contented sigh," thinking that his mother's reappearance will mean the return of lavish dinners and hard-boiled **eggs** for breakfast.

*Although Marilyn tries hard to leave thoughts of her family behind, ultimately she realizes that she has taken her family with her in a way that she could not have imagined. Throughout this passage, Marilyn is alienated from her body, which seems to be rebelling against her desire to shut out thoughts of home in favor of concentrating on her education. While it is her body that takes her into the hospital, once again she is on the wrong side of the hospital bed—rather than treating patients, she is a patient herself.*



*Both Marilyn and James respond to the prospect of her return in an ambivalent way. James' lack of anger is surprising; the unquestioning devotion and care he shows to Marilyn reflect a form of love traditionally more associated with femininity than masculinity. At the same time, his answer to Marilyn's request for forgiveness is omitted, so the reader is left guessing how he reacted. Meanwhile, Marilyn seems to be simultaneously bewildered, upset, and relieved.*



*Lydia and Nath's silent tears suggest that their feelings about Marilyn's return are too enormous—and perhaps too complex—for words. It is only when Nath's thoughts latch onto ordinary, concrete matters (food) that he is finally able to feel a sense of relief and happiness. Lydia, meanwhile, evidently feels protective of her mother. Opening the Betty Crocker cookbook gave Lydia a markedly accurate insight into Marilyn's mindset and her reasons for abandoning the family. Hiding the cookbook is an act that a parent would do for a child, not the other way around.*



However, Nath was mistaken about the food. Marilyn refuses to cook, buying only pre-prepared food. At the same time, she starts grilling Lydia constantly on math equations, and Lydia starts counting everything: hot dogs, hugs, fireworks. Marilyn buys Lydia a stack of science books, which they enthusiastically read together. Lydia says “yes” to everything Marilyn suggests. Two weeks later, James and Marilyn drive to Toledo to collect Marilyn’s things, leaving the kids with Mrs. Allen. Nath is feeling upset; Marilyn refuses to let him participate in the scientific discussions and games, and she doesn’t seem to care about his interest in outer space. That morning, he’d asked Marilyn for a hard-boiled **egg**, and to his delight she’d said yes; however, as soon as Lydia came down and started telling Marilyn about her dreams, Marilyn forgot all about the egg. Meanwhile, James still teases him about his obsession with astronauts.

*While Marilyn has physically returned to Middlewood, she still remains absent within Nath’s life. As a result of her own personal disappointment and single-minded obsession with Lydia’s academic success, Marilyn fails to even notice that Nath has also developed a strong interest in science. In this sense, Marilyn overcorrects the gender bias that both she and Lydia face and ends up ignoring and excluding her son based on his gender. This turn of events suggests that sometimes emotional “disappearance” and neglect can be even more painful than literal absence.*



Mrs. Allen falls asleep in front of the TV and Nath heads outside. Lydia asks where he is going, before eventually following him. They walk out to the **lake** and Nath looks at the houses on the other side of the water, imagining that they are populated with perfect families. Lydia becomes anxious and says they should go home so they don’t get into trouble. Nath feels that everything in his life is “askew,” that it is all now focused on Lydia. He pushes her in the lake. As she disappears under the water, Nath feels completely alone, and in this moment he realizes that it doesn’t matter whether Lydia is physically present or not—his life will still “orbit” around her. As he jumps in to pull her out, he feels a great sense of relief and he realizes that Lydia fell too easily, that there was something about the lake that pulled her towards it. Back on the ground, Lydia vomits up lake water and takes Nath’s hand to pull herself up. They walk back to the house, where Mrs. Allen is still asleep, and they don’t tell anyone about what happened. Nath both pushed Lydia in and pulled her out, and each of their memories will always focus on a different side of the incident.

*While it is still not clear how Lydia dies, this scene provides important new information about her death (as well as Nath’s reaction to the loss of his sister). As Nath gazes across the lake and imagines perfect families living on the other side, the lake comes to represent the mysterious force that stops the Lee family being perfect—the force that makes them “misfits” in a town of normal people. Nath’s feeling that Lydia is pulled into the lake highlights a sense of inevitability about her eventual death. It also evokes a connection between the family’s favoritism of Lydia (which Nath describes in physics terms, discussing gravity, imbalance, and orbit) and their inability to function as a harmonious and “normal” unit.*



At Middlewood Elementary’s welcome-back picnic at the beginning of the school year, Nath and James enter the father-son **egg** race. They are in first place until Nath trips and breaks his egg before the finish line. Nath is relieved when James says it’s ok, but crushed when James then jokes that Nath would have won if only there’d been a reading contest. Nath is increasingly pained by his father’s teasing, and even James realizes that he’s being cruel. James is horrified by the way in which Nath increasingly resembles James as a child, and he cannot stop himself from teasing Nath even though he knows he should. Next, Lydia and Nath enter the three-legged race and they immediately come tumbling down. The handkerchief tying their legs together is too tight, and they cannot match each other’s stride.

*The elementary school picnic seems innocent and harmonious, yet sinister and painful realities play out beneath the surface. Nath is not personally particularly invested in winning the father-son race; he simply doesn’t want his father to see him as a disappointment. However, James uses the frivolous occasion of the race to further bully Nath about his social and athletic inadequacy. Meanwhile, the handkerchief tied between Lydia and Nath symbolizes the extent to which the family is “tied” to Lydia, such that when she falls, she brings all the Lees crashing down with her.*



## CHAPTER 7

Ten years pass; the world is shaken by dramatic political events, yet the Lees remain “bound” together by Lydia. James continues to be affected by incidents of racism, his despair only mitigated by the sight of Lydia’s blue eyes. Marilyn still refuses to cook a meal from scratch, but she delights in every opportunity to buy Lydia a new science book or help out with a school project. On each of these occasions, she checks to make sure that this is what Lydia really wants, and each time Lydia responds with an enthusiastic “yes.” Meanwhile, the world around them changes; Yale and **Harvard** admit women, and support for the Equal Rights Amendment gathers momentum. Marilyn fantasizes about seeing Lydia in a white **doctor’s** coat, “a ring of men awed at her deft handiwork.”

Every evening at dinner James and Marilyn talk to Lydia at length about social and academic pursuits, before briefly turning Nath to ask how he is doing. Each time this happens, Nath panics, not wanting James to tease him about his interest in outer space and unable to think of anything else to say. While he is forced to hide his books and magazines “like pornography,” Nath is also relieved to be out of the spotlight of his parents’ attention, as he sees how miserable it makes Lydia. Meanwhile, Lydia keeps saying “yes” to her parents, going to the school dances and enrolling in college-level science classes while suppressing her true feelings. Hannah is quiet, forgotten about from the moment she joins the family.

It is now 1976. Lydia is 15 and will be dead in five months. She is failing physics and has only just scraped a passing grade in biology. Meanwhile, Marilyn boasts to Janet that Lydia is a “genius” and continues to plan ways for Lydia to skip ahead in science, a prospect James endorses, as it will give Lydia the opportunity to socialize with older students. Lydia hides her failing grades from her parents, and one of her teachers has threatened to call them himself if Lydia does not get her mother’s signature on her most recent failed test by the return from Christmas break. Lydia knows that the word “**doctor**” is the heartbeat of Marilyn’s life. She tries to forge Marilyn’s signature, but it is obviously a fake.

*Neither James nor Marilyn puts pressure on Lydia in the traditional, draconian sense. They do not set especially strict rules for her or subject her to harsh punishments. Instead, both James and Marilyn project their own feelings of inadequacy and disappointment onto Lydia, hoping she will “save” them from their own fates. Yet while the pressure that Lydia’s parents place on her is much more subtle than old-fashioned strictness, it is arguably even more emotionally damaging.*



*This passage makes clear that both too much and too little attention can have a disastrous impact on children. Lydia is suffocated by the emotional pressure her parents place on her, yet is simultaneously isolated by being the favorite child. While Nath is saddened by his father’s teasing, he is at least free to pursue his own interests without hassle. Meanwhile, Hannah is so forgotten that the reader is left with little information about her.*



*Although the cause of Lydia’s death remains a mystery, during this part of the novel there is a sense that sinister forces are building toward the dramatic climax of her body being found in the lake. Increasingly, Lydia’s life is shrouded in secrecy and dishonesty, and this disconnection from the truth is growing more and more unsustainable by the day. There seems to be little hope that James or Marilyn will change their ways, and thus it looks inevitable that they will push Lydia to a breaking point.*



Under her mattress, Lydia has been hiding a letter informing Nath that he has been admitted to the **Harvard** Class of 1981. Nath has been checking the mail every day; focusing on his own future, he has grown increasingly unaware of Lydia's struggles. Lydia recalls a moment in kindergarten when the most popular girl in her class invited Lydia to come to her house. At the time, Lydia responded by saying that her mother said that she had to come straight home after school, and the girl walked away laughing. Lydia had declined every social invitation throughout her childhood and teenage years, desperate to come straight home and see Marilyn. Throughout this time, Nath had been her only friend at school, saving her a seat on the bus and in the cafeteria. Lydia fantasizes that if she hides Nath's letter from Harvard, he will have "no choice but to stay" in Middlewood with her.

When Nath's guidance counselor asks him about his career plans, he whispers that he is interested in space "as if telling a dirty secret." He fears that the counselor will laugh, but instead she gives him practical advice. Although Nath dreams of attending a science-focused university like MIT or Caltech, he knows that James will only approve of **Harvard**. Nath dreams of "leaving everyone behind," including Lydia. At 15, Lydia wears lipstick to school to seem grown up, but her **Baby Soft perfume** means she still smells like a little girl. Over the years, Nath has felt inextricably bound to Lydia and has "absorbed her miseries," but now he looks forward to drifting away from her, "untethered." As Christmas approaches, Nath reasons that he must have been rejected from Harvard; he prepares to apply to other schools and secretly fears he will be stuck at home forever.

The doorbell rings—it's Jack. He hands Nath an envelope, which was accidentally delivered to the Wolffs. Jack points to the seal, saying it looks like Nath will be headed to **Harvard**. Nath counters that it might be a rejection, and Jack shrugs and leaves. Nath opens the letter and is flooded with relief to see that he has been admitted. He smiles up at Hannah, telling her that he got in. James enters, puts a hand on his son's shoulder and let's out a strained "Not bad." Marilyn is more enthusiastic, kissing her son's cheek. Lydia watches from the top of the stairs, noticing James smile at Nath in a way he never has before. Just as Nath is about to shout up to tell her the news, Lydia exclaims that she is supposed to let Marilyn know she is failing physics.

*This passage makes heartbreakingly clear the extent to which Lydia's existence has been dominated by repression, secrecy, and lies. Lydia has effectively sacrificed her social life in favor of spending time with her mother—a choice produced by the constant anxiety that Marilyn will abandon her again. She is forced to pretend to her parents that she does have friends, and is in turn alienated from Nath by her parents' attention. The decision to hide Nath's letter highlights the fact that, despite being 15, Lydia remains childlike, perhaps stunted in maturity by her intense relationship with her parents.*



*Burdened by Lydia's unhappiness and James' teasing, Nath longs to disappear and leave his family behind. Although he doesn't acknowledge it consciously, this desire is a direct echo of Marilyn's wish to escape the demands of her family through education. Over the years, Nath has supported Lydia, helping to shoulder her burden while juggling burdens of his own. Yet these years of support have created a sense of resentment inside him, such that he now wants to leave everything behind—including his beloved sister.*



*This scene illustrates the way in which people can act in a cruel manner even if they do not have cruel intentions. Jack's shrug seems callous and indifferent, when in fact he is upset at the prospect of Nath moving away. Similarly, James tries to be happy for his son, but after years of putting him down cannot find a way to earnestly express his feelings. Finally, Lydia does not wish to derail Nath's happy moment out of jealousy or spite. Rather, she has been consumed by panic over how to tell Marilyn about physics, and sees this as her only chance.*



At dinner, Marilyn interrogates Lydia, asking how she will feel if she is unable to find a job and ends up forced to become a housewife. Everyone forgets about Nath and his letter from **Harvard**. After dinner, Lydia says congratulations to Nath, adding: "I knew you'd get in." But Nath is too angry to respond. Later, Lydia walks into the bathroom when Nath is brushing his teeth. Nath assumes that Lydia wants him to reassure her that everything will be ok, and he can see that she has been crying. However, he only spits angrily before walking out of the bathroom. In the morning, Marilyn pins up Lydia's failed test in the kitchen. She spends the entirety of the next three days working with Lydia on physics problems. Lydia memorizes the answers to and waits for James to intervene, but he doesn't. Only on Christmas morning does Marilyn finally unpin the test.

Lydia dreads receiving her mother's Christmas gift. Usually, Marilyn gives Lydia books that she really just wants for herself and then proceeds to take them from Lydia's room. Nath feels a hint of pity for his sister. Now that the news about **Harvard** has sunk in, it finally feels real that he will leave Lydia alone with their parents. He recalls memories of the two of them acting as a "team," protecting each other from their parents' disapproval. Now Nath watches as James gives Lydia a present. Usually James leaves all the Christmas shopping to Marilyn, but it is clear he has picked this one personally. Lydia fantasizes that underneath the wrapping paper will be a necklace, a gift that tells her she is "perfect just as you are." Instead, however, she finds three books: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Six Ways of Making People Like You*, and *Fundamental Techniques in Handling People*.

James explains that the books are supposed to help Lydia "be popular." Lydia tells James she has friends, even though she knows this isn't true. James says he knows she does, but that "people skills" are especially important now that she is getting older. Lydia opens her other presents—as expected, her mother has given her more science books. Later, James asks her if she likes the self-help books. He begins telling her that he wishes he had them at her age, but instead says: "I thought you'd like it." James has never mentioned his youth to Lydia, but she still senses the loneliness of that time. Lydia tells him she loves the books, but James can hear that she is lying and feels "foolish" for having bought them. When Lydia was 13, James encouraged her to call a girl from school to suggest they go roller-skating together. However, the girl told Lydia she was busy and abruptly hung up. Seeing that James was listening, Lydia faked a friendly conversation. Eventually, she made a habit of doing this, almost convincing herself these friends were real.

*Just as Lydia feared, her world is unraveling. Not only is Nath about to leave, but he is now so angry that he refuses to even speak to her. At the very same moment, the truth about her academic performance has finally come out, and her parents' reaction could not be worse. James, Marilyn, and Nath are all severely disappointed in Lydia, and none of them chooses to look beyond this disappointment in order to understand why Lydia has let them down or how she might be feeling. Instead, Lydia becomes trapped in a web of disappointment from which there seems to be no way out.*



*Christmas morning at the Lee household is tragic almost to the point of comedy. All three children desire their parents' unconditional love and approval above anything else, yet this (seemingly simple) desire proves continually elusive. In this scene it is also clear that James and Marilyn doom their children (and in particular Lydia) to failure due to the way in which their respective ideas of success clash so severely. Where Marilyn daydreams of Lydia burying her nose in physics textbooks and eschewing the role of wife and mother, James wants nothing more than for his daughter to be popular and "normal."*



*To the reader, it is devastatingly clear that if only Lydia and James were honest with each other, their relationship would be much less painful. Instead, Lydia pretends to have friends in order to make her father happy. James' reasons for withholding the truth about his own past are more complex. To some extent, he seems to be concerned about being a positive role model for his children. However, overall the main issue seems to be that James simply finds it too painful to look back on his life before meeting Marilyn. The irony of this fact is that by refusing to admit his own vulnerability to Lydia, he leaves no room for her to be honest about her social difficulties with him.*



Lydia reads *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which advises her to be a good listener and let people spend most of their time thinking about themselves. Nath tries to apologize, but Lydia doesn't feel like talking to him. Nath points his new camera at her, asking her to smile. Lydia looks up at him but remains deadpan as he takes the picture. Back at school, Jack shows up in Lydia's junior physics class; he explains that he failed the course the year before, and it is required in order to graduate. He teases Lydia about not understanding the concept of failure, before she admits that she is also failing physics. Surprised, Jack reaches back and draws a small zero on Lydia's knee, calling it their "secret membership sign." All day, Lydia touches the zero, wondering if Jack really wants to be friends with her.

Lydia works hard, and at the end of January Marilyn checks in to see how physics is going. Lydia reports that things are much better, but Marilyn, not yet satisfied, encourages her to ask for an extra credit assignment. James asks after a girl at school who he believes is Lydia's friend. He then asks about Karen Adler, who had accepted Lydia's invitation to the movies soon after she moved to Middletown the year before. However, when James picked them up, he embarrassed Lydia by making endless, try-hard references to pop culture. Back at school, Lydia had apologized to Karen, but Karen replied that it was cute that James was trying to help her fit in.

Marilyn tells James to leave Lydia alone, and he replies that he's "not the one nagging about her homework." Lydia silently begs Nath to interrupt, and Nath obliges, telling James that he needs him to sign some forms for the **Harvard** campus visit. Nath explains that it will take place in April and that he'll have to miss a few days of school. Lydia believes her parents will certainly forbid this, but to her surprise, they agree. James even smiles and promises to buy Nath a plane ticket. Lydia is furious, and suddenly announces that Jack is in her physics class. She resolves to befriend Jack in order to spite Nath. This is difficult at first; Jack is frequently absent from school, and spends the rest of his time driving around with other girls. However, eventually she manages to ask Jack for a ride home. Jack is uncertain, asking if Nath minds her "hanging out with a guy like me." Lydia insists that she is free to do as she pleases.

*The photo of Lydia emphasizes the tension between appearances and reality. The books that James gives Lydia encourage her to force her way into friendships and popularity through manipulation of appearances, and it is comparatively easy to appear happy in a photo. However, Lydia is so unable to vocalize her unhappiness that she uses the photo as a rare opportunity to convey how she really feels—not by doing anything in particular, but instead by refusing to do what is asked of her for once. For a brief moment, Lydia is both autonomous and honest.*



*Lydia's conversations with her parents about her friends and grades have turned into a kind of ritualistic performance that involves no honesty at all. Lydia has grown so accustomed to telling her parents only what will please them that they know almost nothing about her. The reality of her life—both the good and the bad—becomes an enormous secret to which no one in her immediate family has any real access.*



*Lydia's desire to punish Nath for leaving may seem cruel and unfair. However, given the history of Marilyn's disappearance, it is perhaps unsurprising that Lydia is so sensitive about the idea of Nath abandoning her. She is made even more frustrated by the fact that Nath's departure is completely beyond her control. Whereas Lydia has done everything in her power to prevent Marilyn from disappearing again, her efforts to influence Nath's future have proven fruitless. Lydia therefore uses the one opportunity she has to get to Nath: Jack.*



Lydia sits in nervous silence; she has never been in a car with a boy her age before. She asks Jack for a cigarette and he laughs, telling her he knows she doesn't smoke. When Lydia puts the packet of cigarettes back in the glove compartment, a box of condoms falls out. Jack notices her fright and asks if she's ever seen condoms before. Lydia attempts to distract him by discussing physics. She claims not to "give a rat's ass" about physics, but Jack points out that when she gets her assignments back it always looks like she's about to cry. Jack asks if Nath will be upset when he learns that Lydia is smoking, and Lydia responds that he'll be more upset to learn that she is spending time with Jack. To Lydia, it is clear that the boys both really hate each other. She assures Jack that she's not like her brother.

Jack asks Lydia about her blue eyes, and if she knows that she's the only non-white girl in school. Lydia pretends that she didn't realize. When Jack asks what it's like to be Chinese in Middlewood, Lydia thinks of all the times when she has momentarily forgotten that she is different than everyone else—only to be suddenly, jarringly reminded by a racist image or comment. Lydia tells Jack that people tend to think they know about her before they've met her, adding that Jack himself had done this. Jack is silent, and Lydia is worried that she has ruined their chances at friendship; however, then Jack offers her a cigarette. As they drive along, Lydia looks out across the lake, unaware that in only three months her body will lie at the bottom of it.

## CHAPTER 8

After Lydia's death, James starts going on long drives. He buys sleeping pills, but the only place he can sleep properly is in Louisa's bed. The dean cancels James' summer school class to give him time to grieve, but this only makes things worse, as James finds being at home "unbearable." He goes to his office in the morning and spends the afternoons at Louisa's apartment. He and Marilyn are barely speaking. One evening, he gets home to see Nath holding the refrigerator door open, deciding on what to eat. James barks at his son for wasting power; Nath, who is holding a hard-boiled **egg** in his hand, apologizes. James is suddenly aware that he smells of Louisa's perfume, and tells Nath that his summer course is a "great responsibility" and that he has spent the day at conferences and meetings. He grows angrier and angrier, asking Nath if he has "any friends at all." Nath replies that he doesn't, and adds that James smells like perfume. James grabs his son and says Nath doesn't know anything about his life, just like he didn't know anything about Lydia's.

*Lydia's performance of carelessness and coolness is clearly not convincing to Jack. Yet while Jack doesn't share Lydia's innocence or inexperience, he seems to identify with her reasons for wanting to seem cool in the first place. Although Lydia doesn't know it yet, Jack is also engaged in a performance designed to distract others from discovering who he really is. Once again, if Lydia and Jack were honest with each other, they would perhaps be able to form a real connection. However, both are too concerned with maintaining appearances for this to be a possibility.*



*This is one of the only times in the novel in which Lydia gives an honest answer about how she feels about her life. It is also important that, of all the ways in which her racial identity shapes her life experience, she chooses to tell Jack about the way in which it informs people's expectations of her. This links Lydia's experience of racism with the way her parents treat her, always assuming that they know about her life and desires, rather than waiting for her to tell them herself.*



*Only Lydia has died, but all of her relatives have each, in their own way, disappeared. Marilyn spends every day in Lydia's room, her identity now completely subsumed by her daughter's. Nath is biding his time until he leaves for Harvard, and Hannah, as usual, seems to have been completely forgotten. However, Lydia's death has arguably had the greatest impact on James' behavior. Whereas James used to be fixated on holding the family together in a harmonious fashion and appearing "normal" to outsiders, he now seems bent on destroying the unity of the family. He does not openly express sympathy with any of his family members, and he takes out his own feelings of guilt in the form of aggression toward Nath.*



James instantly wants to retract his words, but it is too late. Nath punches the countertop and runs out of the kitchen. James notices a smashed **egg** lying on the counter. In the morning, James sees it is July 3rd; this used to be a happy date, the day Marilyn returned home. Now it signifies that it has been two months since Lydia disappeared. James reads the newspaper, which contains an article on Lydia's death. Karen Adler is quoted saying that Lydia "seemed lonely," and there is a sidebar noting that, "Children of mixed backgrounds often struggle to find their place." The phone rings; it is Officer Fiske, who tells James that they have concluded that Lydia's death was a suicide and are closing the investigation. Fiske explains that it is impossible to know for sure, but that the evidence indicates that suicide is by far the most likely explanation. James thanks Fiske and hangs up.

*In both Marilyn's and Lydia's cases, July 3rd is ostensibly a day of resolution. However, in both cases, this resolution turns out to be false. When Marilyn returned, she may have been physically back with the family, but the problems and difficulties that led Marilyn to flee in the first place remained, and they seem to have contributed to Lydia's disappearance years later. Similarly, although the investigation into Lydia's death has reached a conclusion, the police's decision provides no emotional closure for the Lees—only further turmoil.*



When James tells Marilyn about Fiske's call, she replies that the police can't close the case when "whoever did this is still out there." She insists that the police don't know Lydia, and that she, Marilyn, knows that Lydia would not have gone out on the **lake** alone. She accuses James of agreeing with the police and adds that if Lydia had been white, the investigation would not have closed. James is stunned; he'd always hoped that Marilyn had not thought this way. He replies that if Lydia had been white, "none of this would have happened," because Lydia would have "fit in." He tells Marilyn that Doris was right, that they should never have married.

*Both James and Marilyn agree that Lydia's race is relevant to her disappearance, but their interpretations of how this is true differ quite drastically. James believes that Lydia's race led to her alienation and loneliness, which in turn drove her to suicide. He blames himself (as the bearer of her racial identity) and regrets his marriage to Marilyn as a result. He believes Marilyn feels the same sense of regret, but it seems more likely that Marilyn is frustrated at the perceived racism of the police.*



James leaves and goes straight to Louisa's apartment. She can tell something is wrong, and offers him some steamed buns. Although James has not spoken Chinese in forty years, he remembers their name: *Char siu bau*. The bun tastes "like a kiss." James and Louisa have sex on the kitchen floor, and James tells her she is "the kind of girl I should have married." Silently, Louisa convinces herself that James will leave Marilyn for her.

*In many ways, James' affair with Louisa represents a moment of self-actualization—for the first time James does not feel ashamed of who he is. At the same time, it is also involves delusion. Both James and Louisa believe that their union will almost magically solve problems, rather than create them.*



Back home, Marilyn tells Nath and Hannah that the police have ruled Lydia's death a suicide. Nath calls Officer Fiske and urges him to keep investigating Jack, but Nath gets the impression that Fiske thinks he is "being hysterical." That night, Hannah wants to fall asleep in Lydia's bed, but knows that Marilyn is in Lydia's room. Hannah has stolen small items from each member of her family and hidden them around the house. She knows that Nath is convinced that Jack is responsible for Lydia's death, but she also knows that this is mistaken. The previous summer, the three Lee children were all at the **lake**, and while Nath was swimming Jack appeared and sat next to Lydia. Walking toward them, Nath asked Jack what he was doing there. Jack told Lydia that she should cover up because she was burning. As Nath came closer, a drop of water fell from his hair into Jack's hand. Jack licked it "as if it were honey," although the only person who noticed this was Hannah.

Hannah is so familiar with unrequited love that she immediately recognized Jack's desire for Nath. Unsure of how else to acknowledge this, she touched Jack's toe with her own, and he ruffled her hair. At this moment, however, Nath said, "Let's go," and told Jack to stay away from his sister. As they walked away, Hannah smiled at Jack, trying to let him know that she understood. She knows that Jack did not hurt Lydia—that he has never hurt anyone.

Back in the present, Marilyn frets over James' angry words. When she told James about Doris' disapproval on their wedding day, she never imagined it would affect him like this. She plans to tell him that she would have married him "a hundred times if it gave us Lydia," and that he is not to blame for Lydia's death. However, James doesn't come home that night. Marilyn drives to his office, but he is not there either. In the morning, as Marilyn wonders what to do, Nath announces that he thinks James is with Louisa. Marilyn finds Louisa's address in the phone book and drives straight to her apartment, leaving the children at home. Louisa answers the door half-dressed, and Marilyn tells her that she is looking for James, who didn't come home the night before. As they speak, Marilyn observes that Louisa looks like an innocent doll—the opposite of Marilyn. Marilyn tells Louisa that James talks about her often, a fact that clearly pleases her. Marilyn asks to use Louisa's phone, but Louisa claims it's not working. Finally, Marilyn thanks Louisa for her help and tells her to tell James she'll see him at home.

*In this passage Ng combines two classic literary devices used to provide the reader with information while building suspense. The first of these devices is including the perspective of a quiet, watchful character. Although this figure doesn't play an active role in the events of the narrative, they act as a silent witness who often ends up with a more accurate and coherent understanding of the events than the other, more central characters. The other device is the use of a child's perspective. Hannah notices crucial details about those around her, but because she is only 11 she fails to fully grasp their significance. This allows the reader to devise their own interpretations.*



*The other characters in the book tend to misread each other's actions as more aggressive than they are in reality. Only Hannah shows an ability to pick up on other people's vulnerability. She therefore has a greater capacity for connection with others than the rest of her family, but she is unable to express this.*



*The conversation between Marilyn and Louisa is striking; both are lying and withholding information, and both are aware that the other is not being fully honest. At the same time, they manage to convey meaning beneath the literal truth of their words. When Marilyn observes that Louisa is half-dressed, she is implicitly telling her that she knows about James and Louisa's affair. When Louisa claims that her phone is not working, she might as well be telling Marilyn that James is inside her apartment. Marilyn even manages to get a message to James by telling Louisa that "if" she sees him, to tell him to come home. In doing so, Marilyn indirectly informs James that she both knows about his affair and is preparing to confront him about it.*



## CHAPTER 9

Three months earlier, Lydia is pleased to see that people are beginning to grow suspicious about her and Jack's relationship. However, these suspicions are unfounded; when she and Jack hang out, all they do is smoke and talk. Lydia tells Jack all about the pressures her parents place on her—Marilyn's obsession with ensuring that she becomes a doctor, and James' constant badgering about social activities. At first Lydia tries not to mention Nath, but Jack is clearly curious about him. He asks about Nath's interest in space and whether he's as quiet at home as he is at school. Lydia tells Jack the truth, all the while feeling guilty for making Nath seem "pathetic." Soon, Jack starts teaching her to drive, and Lydia is thrilled by the prospect of getting her license and going wherever she wants. She is determined not to remain "trapped" with her parents after Nath leaves.

Jack asks if Lydia will tell Nath he's "not such a bad guy," and Lydia smiles and says Nath wouldn't believe her. Back at home, Lydia goes up to her room and puts on a record, but then Marilyn comes in and tells her she shouldn't listen to music before her homework is finished. Marilyn stresses the importance of high school and urges Lydia not to let her "life slip away." Marilyn says that when she's dead, she wants Lydia to remember that she can do anything she wants. Lydia remembers her promise to do whatever Marilyn wanted, and gets out her schoolbooks. Later that evening, Lydia sees another letter from **Harvard** has arrived; she rips it in half, and in that moment Nath walks in. He is furious and exclaims that he can't wait to leave.

Nath eventually gets over his initial anger, but Lydia is haunted by the incident. After a few days, James knocks on Lydia's door, saying he's noticed she's been down and has bought her a gift to cheer her up. James even asked Louisa what she thought a girl Lydia's age might like. It is a silver locket, and Lydia is thrilled. However, then she looks inside and sees a photo of James next to a photo of her from the 9th grade dance he'd forced her to attend. She'd lied and said she'd enjoyed it, but in the picture it's clear that she is miserable. James says he knows that Lydia has been having a difficult time, but that she should remember that school is not the most important thing in life—"not as important as friendship, and love." He asks Lydia to smile every time she looks at the locket, and adds that he was told "everyone was wearing silver this year." Lydia thinks resentfully about the James' obsession with what "everyone" is doing.

*The reality of Lydia's relationship with Jack provides an almost comic subversion of expectations when it comes to matters of appearances, innocence, and guilt. Throughout the book, the characters deliberately attempt to conceal evidence of "guilt"—whether the condoms Marilyn finds in Lydia's bag or the smell of Louisa's perfume that lingers on James—in order to maintain the appearance of innocence. Lydia, however, enjoys knowing that people have a false impression of her; the idea that she is not as innocent as she seems becomes a kind of shield under which she can finally be free.*



*Lydia's comment that Nath wouldn't believe her even if she tried to tell him the truth about Jack is important—it illustrates the extent to which each of the characters is committed to their own version of the truth. At the same time, it also suggests that Lydia may be too reluctant to believe that people can change their minds. During the moment in which Marilyn harasses her about her homework, Lydia has the opportunity to reveal the truth to her mother. Instead, she decides to continue the lie in order to make her mother happy.*



*In this scene, the reader's sympathies are drastically drawn in two directions at once. On the one hand, it is tempting to feel pity for James, who wants nothing more than for Lydia to be happy. He seems more perceptive and sensitive to Lydia's moods than Marilyn, and makes an effort to give Lydia something that will remind her of his love. On the other hand, it is also clear that—from Lydia's perspective—James' emphatic emphasis on happiness and friendship comes to feel like a constant reminder of her inadequacy. It also reasserts the fact that her father has little understanding of Lydia's life or what would genuinely make her happy.*



Lydia tells James that the necklace is beautiful, and James asks her to promise him that she will “get along with everyone.” Lydia wears the necklace the next day, on her birthday. James promises to give Lydia her “first” driving lesson after school, and Marilyn says they’ll have cake and presents in the evening. Lydia silently thinks that in only six weeks, she’ll have her permit and can drive away. After school, she is surprised to see Louisa in the car with James; they explain that James is dropping her off at the dentist. Lydia immediately assumes that the two of them are having an affair. Louisa asks if Lydia likes the necklace, admitting she helped pick it. Lydia angrily responds that Louisa doesn’t even know her, adding that James has never mentioned Louisa. She then asks James where he drove when he got his driver’s license, inquiring if he went on dates. Sounding like a teenager, James responds that he didn’t go on dates. They pull up to the dentist’s office and Louisa leaves.

Despite Lydia’s obvious sulking, James has no idea that there is anything wrong. When they get to the DMV, he sends her off with words of encouragement. Lydia, meanwhile, feels furious with her entire family. When she opens her test booklet, she finds herself unsure of the answers to any of the questions. Before she knows it, a woman appears and tells her that her time is up. When Lydia protests that she hasn’t finished, the woman informs her that she only needed to answer 14 questions to pass; Lydia, however, has only answered five. Outside, she tells James that she has failed the test. He reassures her, telling her that she can take it again, but all Lydia can think is that when Nath leaves, she will be trapped.

Back home, Marilyn and Hannah prepare to surprise Lydia with an elaborate cake in the shape of a driver’s license. While Marilyn is still icing the cake, James and Lydia arrive home, thereby ruining the moment of surprise. When Marilyn asks about the test, Lydia defiantly declares: “I failed.” Marilyn comforts Lydia, telling her that at least she didn’t fail a subject in school. Lydia flashes a fake smile at the whole family, which—although none of the older Lees notice—terrifies Hannah. Lydia goes upstairs to shower, and Marilyn asks James what happened. James doesn’t know, but Hannah does—while sneaking around in Lydia’s room, she noticed that Lydia hadn’t looked at the test preparation materials. Upstairs, Lydia takes her necklace off angrily. An hour later, she comes back downstairs, dressed as if “for a party.” She fakes another smile for her family. After dinner, Marilyn presents the cake, which she has attempted to alter so it no longer resembles a driver’s license. Hannah watches her sister as the family sings and thinks that Lydia is standing on a “dangerous, high-up ledge.”

*James’ decision to bring Louisa to meet Lydia after school is intriguing. It seems strange that James—who is so concerned about appearances—would be happy to make it seem like he is having an affair. Perhaps there is an extent to which James is desperate to show Lydia that he has a social life outside the realm of their family, even if that consists only of a friendship with one of his students. Indeed, Lydia seems to acknowledge this desire of her father’s, which is why she questions him so aggressively about his own experience of dating. For the first time, Lydia openly suggests that the pressure James put on her was hypocritical, given his own lack of social life.*



*Lydia’s belief that earning her driving permit will finally free her from the grip of parents is clearly irrational. Even if she were bold enough to actually drive away from her parents, where would she go? How would she survive? Her crushing disappointment at having failed the test is also irrational, given that she can take it again in only a week’s time. However, the test has become a symbol onto which Lydia projects all her feelings of hope, fear, disappointment, and self-loathing.*



*Lydia is now engaged in an exaggerated, somewhat grotesque performance of fake happiness in order to please her family. This aggressive exaggeration seems to indicate that Lydia has reached a breaking point and is no longer able to tolerate the pressures under which she is placed. Remarkably, however, only Hannah notices this. Although everyone’s attention is focused on Lydia, none of the older Lees notice that she is behaving strangely. Only Hannah, who is too young to understand anything fully, has any idea what is going on in her sister’s inner life. Hannah perceives that her sister’s emotional fragility and strain are akin to being on a high ledge, which—although Hannah does not recognize this consciously—foreshadows Lydia’s suicide.*



## CHAPTER 10

After Marilyn's visit to Louisa's apartment, James gets dressed in a hurry. He returns to find the house suspiciously peaceful and silent. Marilyn is sitting at Lydia's desk. She asks James how long the affair has been going on, and he replies that it began the day of the funeral. Marilyn asks how old Louisa is and remarks that she seems "sweet" and "docile," and that she would make a "nice little wife." She says she knows Louisa's "type," claiming it's the type of woman Doris hoped Marilyn would be. James is infuriated by Marilyn's mention of her mother, recalling the sting of Doris' disappointment in their marriage.

James mocks Marilyn for wanting to be different when she doesn't know what it's really like to be different, to be ignored and taunted to her face. Marilyn describes times when she was mocked in the laboratory at **Radcliffe**, but adds that she didn't care because she knew she wanted to be a **doctor**. Marilyn bitterly accuses James of always encouraging Lydia to fit in, while Marilyn "wanted her to be exceptional." Marilyn adds that now James can marry Louisa, and that Marilyn only hopes Louisa won't regret giving up her academic career. James responds, "Like you do?" and Marilyn orders him to leave the house. As he goes, James suggests they pretend that they never met and that Lydia was never born.

On his way out, James passes Nath and Hannah, but says nothing to them. After James leaves, Nath grabs his car keys and, in spite of Hannah's protests, drives away too. Upstairs, Marilyn sits in Lydia's room and thinks of all the years Doris spent alone in her house. Marilyn rips in half the postcard of Einstein she gave Lydia, followed by the periodic table. She pulls down Lydia's prize ribbons and all her science books. Once all the books are gone, Marilyn notices one more—the **Betty Crocker cookbook**. She realizes that after she came back from Toledo, Lydia's claim to have "lost" the cookbook was a lie; really, she wanted to hide it so Marilyn would never have to see it again. Suddenly, Marilyn is overcome by the realization that Lydia didn't love science—she loved Marilyn, and simply wanted to make her happy. Marilyn realizes that perhaps the pressure she put on Lydia was what forced her into the **lake**. A small girl walks in, and for a moment Marilyn believes it is Lydia; upon realizing it is a teary-eyed Hannah, Marilyn embraces her.

*Whether Marilyn intends to or not, the language she uses to describe Louisa is tinged with racist stereotypes about Asian women. Although Louisa is young, she is still an adult woman, and Marilyn cruelly belittles her by calling her "docile" and a "nice little wife." Furthermore, there seems to be little basis in this accusation other than Louisa's youth and race. Like Marilyn, Louisa is smart, ambitious, and on track to have a distinguished career.*



*The viciousness of James and Marilyn's argument is made possible by two factors: how well they know each other, and how long they have been repressing the truth. While both James and Marilyn have spent their marriage deliberately ignoring and suppressing their true feelings, this does not mean they were not aware that those feelings existed. Indeed, they seem to understand each other far better than either of them let on prior to this argument.*



*It is arguably not unreasonable that Marilyn spent so long believing that Lydia genuinely loved science, considering how enthusiastically Lydia responded to Marilyn's suggestions that they pursue scientific activities together. At the same time, Marilyn's desire for Lydia to be follow in her own footsteps meant that she approached her relationship with her daughter with the presupposition that Lydia would also want to be a doctor, rather than by first asking what Lydia herself wanted. The fact that what Lydia wanted more than anything was her mother's love makes Marilyn's realization all the more tragic. Her embrace of Hannah at the end of the scene suggests she may have now learned to accept Hannah for who she is.*



On the other side of Middlewood, Nath is at the liquor store. He has set a small bottle of whisky on the counter, though he is convinced that the store owner will turn him away for being too young. However, the owner asks if Nath is the brother of “the girl who died,” and when Nath replies that he is, the owner gives him a second bottle of whisky and refuses to let Nath pay. Nath drives to a secluded spot and gulps the whisky down. It doesn’t have the effect he desires—rather than soothing him, the alcohol causes the world around him to feel even more intense and frenetic than before. Nath thinks of the look on James’ face as he left the house, and vomits onto the ground. Meanwhile, James has been driving aimlessly, but now he sees that he is 15 miles from Toledo. He reflects that it is significant that both he and Marilyn chose the same place to run away.

James thinks about the way in which he has been branded as “different” from the moment he was born. Marilyn, on the other hand, sought out difference, and was able to confront it by “filling her head with dreams.” However, James then thinks about the fact that Marilyn is now boxed into the life of a housewife in a small-town community, stuck like a “trapped bee.” He cannot quite articulate how he feels, but he is stunned by how wrong he has been. Back in Middlewood, Nath feels a gentle hand on his shoulder, along with encouraging words. At first he thinks it might be James, but James has never spoken to him in this way. It is in fact Officer Fiske, who tells Nath, “Son, it’s time to go home.” Nath is so stunned by Fiske’s kindness that he begins to cry.

## CHAPTER 11

Days before Lydia’s death, Nath is desperate to leave Middlewood. As he packs for his campus visit, he also mentally organizes his belongings, picking what he will take when he enrolls at **Harvard** later in the year. The Lees do not travel; they once went to Gettysburg and Philadelphia, but they attracted so many stares that it was the last trip they ever took. Nath opens Lydia’s door and asks her to choose between two shirts, one of which he’s bought recently. He explains that there will be a visiting students mixer on campus, and that his host will be throwing an end-of-semester party. When Nath tries on the new shirt, Lydia is stunned by how good he looks, yet tells him to wear the other one.

*While Marilyn and Hannah have finally turned to one another for comfort, the men of the family have once again “disappeared.” Both James and Nath seem to be consumed by a mix of anger and guilt. Unable to express these feelings verbally, they flee the rest of the family. Note that both James and Nath have turned to stereotypical masculine vices—drinking and adultery—as outlets for their grief, vices that do not suit either of their personalities. Without a viable way of expressing their feelings, both father and son are reduced to clichés.*



*This scene represents a turning point in the novel. Finally, James is able to empathetically connect his own feelings of marginalization, mistreatment, and disappointment to Marilyn’s. Although the two of them face very different struggles, this does not mean that they must face them in isolation. Meanwhile, Nath’s assumption that Officer Fiske was his father—followed by the realization that the officer is being nicer than his father ever was—demonstrates how desperate Nath is for his father’s love.*



*In this passage, travel is presented as both a threat and opportunity. Leaving Middlewood gives Nath the chance to detach himself from his family and all their problems, and to reinvent himself as a new, unencumbered person. However, the trip to Pennsylvania illuminates the alienation and even danger that the Lees risk in traveling around the country as a mixed-race family.*



Later that night, Lydia goes into Nath's room, wanting to tell him about Louisa. She sees Nath on the floor, staring out at the night sky. He invites Lydia to sit next to him, and the two gaze up together, awestruck. The next morning, Lydia asks Nath to promise that he'll call to let her know how it's going. Nath promises as he rushes out the door, but the weekend passes and he doesn't call. Meanwhile, Hannah follows Lydia around, suggesting things for them to do together. On Sunday afternoon, Hannah suggests that they go to the **lake**, and Lydia suddenly notices that Hannah is wearing her silver locket. Hannah quietly confesses that she thought Lydia didn't want it. Remembering the words James said as he gave it to her, Lydia slaps Hannah and yanks the necklace from her neck. She tells Hannah softly that Hannah doesn't want the necklace even if she thinks she does, and that she should never smile if she doesn't want to.

That evening, Lydia calls Nath's host at **Harvard**; when someone picks up the phone, she can hear the sounds of a party in the background. When Nath gets on the phone, Lydia suddenly tears up, but Nath is rude and dismissive, clearly annoyed by her call. He taunts her about the possible reasons she could be calling, and Lydia is struck by the feeling that Nath has already become a "stranger." Eventually, Nath bitterly suggests that Lydia speak to Jack about her problems and hangs up. Although he will later be haunted by those words, at the time he returns to the party, feeling happily detached from his family. Back at home, Lydia feels a sense of anger building within her. Nath has changed, and so has Lydia—she wants to hurt him, the same impulse that caused her to slap Hannah.

On Monday morning Lydia wears lipstick and a beautiful dress James bought for her. At the breakfast table, James tells her "all the boys will be after you now," and Marilyn reminds her to come straight home after school because Nath will be back. That afternoon, Lydia suggests to Jack that they drive up to the Point, a spot overlooking Middlewood where teenagers often drive to have sex. In the car, Jack asks about Nath, wondering if Lydia has missed him and whether he'll come back from **Harvard** for the holidays. Lydia only replies "who cares," and opens the glove compartment to retrieve the box of condoms. Jack is surprised, but Lydia assures him she won't regret it and kisses him. She wants to be "transformed" by the time Nath returns home and she wants "something new to tell him."

*This passage highlights Lydia's liminal position between childhood and adulthood, which is further accentuated by the fact that she is a middle child. Around Nath, Lydia is very much a shy, deferential younger sibling; she craves Nath's attention and approval in the same way that Hannah craves hers. However, Lydia's interactions with Hannah in this scene reveal a new, more adult side to her. Lydia is determined that Hannah not succumb to the same pressures that James and Marilyn place on Lydia herself. She takes on a kind of parental role to Hannah as a form of protection against their real parents.*



*Nath's sudden coldness and cruelty to Lydia reflects his feeling that he needs to make an absolute break with his family in order to be free of them. This echoes Marilyn's decision to disappear without telling her family, and to call them every day without saying anything. Nath's attention is entirely focused on creating a new life for himself at Harvard, and Lydia's phone call is a highly unwanted interruption to that goal. After years of providing support to Lydia, Nath suddenly switches course in order to free himself from the oppressive clutch of his family.*



*Now that Nath is about to leave for college, Lydia associates her own innocence and childishness with distance from her brother. She seems to think that if she loses her innocence by having sex with Jack, this will somehow bridge the gap between her and Nath. In reality, not only will having sex do nothing to change the fact that Nath is going to college, but Nath also hates Jack and thus is unlikely to feel closer to Lydia as a result of knowing she's had sex with him. However, Lydia is so desperate to prevent Nath's inevitable departure that her mind is driven to irrational solutions.*



Jack pulls away from Lydia and looks at her with kindness, but without lust. Hurt, Lydia asks if she's not good enough for him. Jack replies that the problem is Nath, and when Lydia tells him Nath doesn't matter, Jack replies "he matters to me." Lydia is shocked, and Jack gently explains that his reputation as someone who sleeps with lots of girls is designed to crush any suspicions about his sexuality. Lydia remembers all the times Jack brought up Nath and is stunned by how "stupid" and "wrong" she could have been. Jack apologizes, and Lydia responds that she is sorry for him, because he is "in love with someone who hates you." Jack is clearly hurt, and says that at least he knows what he wants and doesn't let other people boss him around. Lydia threatens to tell Nath and the whole school about Jack's feelings, and before Jack can stop her she gets out of the car.

Lydia runs home and finds Marilyn sweeping the porch. Marilyn suggests that they study for Lydia's exams together, but Lydia snaps that she doesn't need her mother's help. Surprised, Marilyn replies that "there's not much time left" before exams begin. At dinner, Nath talks excitedly about his visit to **Harvard** and James occasionally joins in with nostalgic remarks about Cambridge. Lydia, meanwhile, barely notices the conversation taking place around her. She fixates on Jack, wondering where everything went wrong. At 2am, she is suddenly seized by the impulse to go to the **lake**. Sitting on the dock, she reflects that this is the closest she's been to the water since Nath pushed her in. She realizes that Jack was right; she is afraid of everything, so desperate to please her mother and keep the family together that she has destroyed her own chance at happiness. She'd always been afraid of losing Marilyn and James, and now she is afraid of losing Nath, "who had always kept her afloat."

The day Nath pushed her into the **lake** was also the day that Lydia first realized how "suffocating" it was to be loved as her parents loved her. She had even felt a perverse sense of gratitude for being plunged into the water. However, Nath's hands helping her out had then seemed like a wonderful sense of reassurance; ever since then, Lydia thinks, Nath has been helping her not to drown. Lydia promises herself that from now on, she will stop lying to her family to make them happy and pretending to be someone she's not. She will tell Marilyn "it's not too late," will apologize to Jack, and tell Nath that he doesn't need to worry about leaving her. Lydia decides she must "seal her promises," and gets into the boat. She expects to feel nervous, but instead feels peaceful and confident. She rows out and looks at the water, feeling certain that she will be able to swim back to shore as long as she kicks, just like Nath told her. She plans to ask Nath all about **Harvard** the next day. She tells herself "it will be alright" and jumps into the water.

*Lydia's reaction to Jack's revelation illustrates the ways in which—despite her best efforts—she is still childishly self-centered. Rather than feeling sympathy for Jack's inner turmoil or his fear of homophobia, she focuses only on how Jack's love for Nath affects her personally. To Lydia, Jack's love is something else Nath has "won" at her expense (even though this makes little rational sense, especially considering that Nath hates Jack). Furthermore, Lydia further torments Jack by reminding him that his love for Nath is unrequited and by threatening to tell others about it—an act of startling cruelty.*



*Filled with regret, Lydia blames herself for always saying "yes" to her mother and thereby ruining her own life. However, she is also intent on isolating a single moment in which everything in her life went wrong, and eventually she determines that it was when Nath pushed her into the lake. Of course, in reality there is no single moment to blame, but rather an accumulation of thousands of tiny decisions, actions, and events. However, as with Nath's departure, Lydia is desperate to find some sense of control over the events of her life. She fantasizes that by returning to the lake, she will somehow be able to undo all the terrible things that she believes originated there.*



*Although we might expect the description of Lydia's final moments to provide resolution to the question of how and why she dies, this passage is in fact mysterious and inconclusive. As in previous scenes, Lydia is acting in an irrational manner; desperate to assert control over her life, she decides that she must return to the lake and re-submerge herself in the water in order to fix her mistakes and begin again. In this sense, Lydia seeks a rebirth similar to the spiritual rebirth of Christians who are baptized or "born again" through being submerged in water. However, it is unclear where her sudden confidence in her own ability to swim comes from. Why does she throw herself so willingly into the water when it is objectively likely that she will drown?*



## CHAPTER 12

James drives back home from Toledo, repeating to himself that “it is not too late.” Marilyn’s car is not in the driveway, and he fears that she has run away again. In the house, he finds Hannah sitting alone, her eyes red from tears. Hannah explains that Marilyn is upstairs sleeping and that she told Marilyn James would come back. She doesn’t tell him that Nath is also home, after having been dropped off by a police car, smelling of alcohol but “strangely serene.” James sits down with Hannah, and she points at a white footprint on the ceiling, “unexplained and pointless and magical.” They giggle, and James plays a game with Hannah that he used to play with Lydia; he would walk around with Lydia on his back, saying “Where’s Lydia?” James becomes dizzy with the memory of Lydia, but is distracted by Hannah putting her arms around him and asking him to play again.

When Marilyn comes downstairs, she finds James cradling Hannah, and remarks “you’re home.” James repeats that he is home. Marilyn kisses Hannah goodnight, and Hannah goes up to her room overwhelmed by a sense of comfort and peace. Downstairs, Marilyn tells James that she thought he had “gone,” and James says the same thing to her. After this point, James never talks to Louisa again. It takes time for the family to learn more about what really happened to Lydia, and for the tensions between James and Nath to subside. Slowly, they begin uncovering things they kept silent and hidden from each other over the years. In this moment, James and Marilyn lie together in bed, touching each other gently as if recognizing that they are both “fragile.” Marilyn feels happy to be lying in bed with James, but decides she must go and look in Lydia’s room one last time. She has a “vision” of Lydia lying on the bed sleeping, and treasures this sight even though she knows it is not real.

The next morning, Nath sees Jack across the road, walking his dog. Although Nath hasn’t eaten in 24 hours and is still wearing yesterday’s clothes, he runs out after Jack. As he darts out of the front door and toward the lake, Hannah follows him, shouting that Jack is not to blame. Nath yells at Jack that he “can’t hide forever,” and Jack apologizes to him again. It is clear that Jack thought Lydia told Nath about Jack’s secret love. He admits that he should have told Nath himself, but before he says anything more he notices that Nath is in need of someone—anyone—to blame for Lydia’s death. Without only a glance, Jack silently consents to be the object of Nath’s blame, and Nath punches him. Jack doesn’t fight back, and Nath punches him again until Jack’s nose begins to bleed. Hannah cries for Nath to stop, pushing him away. Nath lets himself fall off the dock and into the water.

*Hannah cannot replace Lydia; while they share characteristics, Hannah’s role in the family is decidedly different from Lydia’s, and her existence cannot mitigate the loss of Lydia. On the other hand, in this scene James sees that he has a chance to correct the mistakes he made as a father (and, by extension, as a husband) now that Lydia is gone. When he plays the game with Hannah, he returns to a more innocent, hopeful, and loving version of himself. The fact that the game involves pretend disappearance is perhaps a way of coping with the painful reality of Lydia’s absence.*



*The Lee family’s process of healing is imperfect. All members of the family remain broken by the loss of Lydia. Marilyn still relies on the illusion of “seeing” Lydia in bed to give her comfort, and James behaves cruelly to Louisa in order to restore his relationship with Marilyn. However, it is clear from this passage that the Lees have reached a turning point in their ability to sit with their own grief. Rather than suppressing and denying the truth of what has happened, the family learns to confront it directly, finding support and solace in one another. Although the loss of Lydia can never be repaired, the relations between those left behind betray notes of optimism.*



*In this scene, Jack expresses his love for Nath in the same way that Lydia did for her parents—by pretending to be what Nath wanted him to be. Of course, Jack knows he is innocent and does not deserve to be attacked by Nath, but he can see that Nath is so intent on having someone to blame for Lydia’s death that he sacrifices himself in order to give Nath a moment of satisfaction. Meanwhile, by pushing Nath into the lake, Hannah both repeats what Nath originally did to Lydia and then what Lydia did to herself. Nath’s old self “disappears” in the water, but unlike Lydia he has a chance to be reborn.*



In the water, Nath thinks of Lydia, falling beneath the surface to the bottom of the **lake**. He wants to feel himself sinking, to experience firsthand what Lydia went through, but his body reacts instinctively and pushes him up to the surface. He realizes that he can only guess what was inside Lydia's mind and never know for sure. Both Jack and Hannah are peering into the water, and he can see Jack's hands stretched out toward him. He envisions himself taking Jack's hands and the three of them walking home together, bruised and emotionally wrecked but "strangely aglow." His thoughts stretch further into the future, imagining James becoming more at ease with his identity, Hannah growing up to resemble Lydia, himself looking down at the earth from space and thinking of his missing sister. There will be so many things he will want to tell Lydia. In this moment, he swims toward Jack's outstretched arms and focuses on Hannah, not wanting to "lose sight of her face."

*The tone of the book's final passage is surprisingly—if cautiously—optimistic. In the water, Nath comes to accept that there will forever be things about Lydia that he doesn't know, in the same way that there will be millions of things that he will never be able to tell her. There is no resolution that will mitigate this profound loss, but in losing Lydia he and the other characters are able to find greater happiness in their own lives. Although Lydia failed to be reborn by jumping into the lake, her death gives the gift of symbolic rebirth to her family. While Lydia is gone forever, each of the surviving Lees has been given a new chance to remake themselves and grow closer to one another.*





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