

Everything I Never Told You Study Guide

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

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Plot Summary

Everything I Never Told You examines the Lees, a middle class mixed-racial family in suburban 1970s Ohio. After middle child Lydia disappears and is discovered dead at the bottom of a lake, the Lees will have to revisit painful memories that have contributed to extremely tense and fragile family dynamics. Through shifting perspectives and shifts in time, Everything I Never Told You explores the danger in silence and repression and the repercussions of never voicing how you really feel.

One spring day in 1977, Marilyn and James Lee sit down to breakfast with their son, Nath, and youngest daughter, Hannah. Gradually, the Lees realize that their middle daughter, Lydia has not come down for breakfast and, in fact, nobody knows where she is. The police are informed once the children go off to school, and eventually it is discovered that Lydia drowned in the lake nearby the Lee's house. As the novel opens, the reader sees that Lydia is a mystery to her family just as much as she is a mystery to the reader. Certain things do not add up: Why would Lydia row herself out to the middle of the lake if she cannot swim? Was it Lydia that Hannah heard leaving the house at 2 a.m.?

To help answer this question, the narrator takes the reader back to the 1960s, when Marilyn and James met at Harvard when he was a young graduate student teaching a course that Marilyn took. Their love affair seemed to erase their insecurities--his for being Chinese American, hers for being doomed to end up a homemaker like her mother--and Marilyn becomes pregnant with Nath, and she leaves Harvard and her medical school aspirations to marry James and start a family together.

At Lydia's funeral, Nath expresses his suspicions that their neighbor Jack was involved in Lydia's death. Their argument nearly comes to blows, but it is broken up by James. James drives to his office at the university where he teaches, and his young, Chinese American teaching assistant, Louisa, invites him back to her place for something to eat. They begin to carry on an affair. Marilyn promises herself she will discover the truth about Lydia's death. She spends time searching Lydia's room for answers and is only left with questions as she realizes she might not have known her daughter after all.

The narrative switches back to ten years prior to the present day when Marilyn begins to feel restless after her mother dies. James takes Nath to the community pool and witnesses his son being the victim of racist harassment much like he has felt throughout his life. Marilyn realizes she still wants to be a doctor, and she plots to abandon her family and move to Toledo so she can finish her pre-med requirements. She leaves without explanation, tearing up a note to James that he pieces together.

In present day, Hannah wonders about her sister's life. Marilyn and James argue over the cause of Lydia's death, if it was a murder or suicide. James and Louisa's affair intensifies. The narrative then returns to the summer that Marilyn disappeared and talks of how the children were left to their own devices by a distraught James. Nath takes an interest in space travel and astronomy, which he eventually intends to pursue in college.



Marilyn's studies are interrupted when she discovers she is pregnant with Hannah. She is forced to come home, and Lydia promises herself she will do whatever her parents ask. Marilyn begins to shape Lydia's studies so she will become a doctor. This intense pressure on Lydia continues to present day. The family begins to orient themselves around Lydia and her future.

In 1976, Lydia is failing physics, a secret she has kept from her mother. Lydia has intercepted a letter to Nath telling him that he has been accepted to Harvard. Eventually Nath is given another letter, and his celebratory moment with his family is interrupted when Lydia tells everyone of her struggles with physics. This causes tension between Lydia and Nath, who is finally getting tired of having everyone's attention focus on Lydia, and Marilyn is furious. When school resumes, Lydia decides to start a friendship with Jack, the Lee's neighbor and someone who Nath detests. Previously Hannah had discovered that Jack is in love with Nath.

After Lydia dies, Nath suspects his father is having an affair. Marilyn and James have a fight after a police officer calls to tell James they are ruling Lydia's death a suicide. They both reveal their frustrations with their marriage. James' frustrations are mainly because he feels self-conscious about his heritage and being "different," and he also suspects Marilyn views their marriage as a mistake. James flees to Louisa's apartment. Nath tells Marilyn of his suspicions that James is having an affair, and Marilyn tracks him down at Louisa's apartment but does not confront him.

The plot then weaves back to earlier in the year when Lydia and Jack are becoming friends. He is helping her learn how to drive, and he also listens to her problems. Jack also asks endless questions about Nath, but Lydia does not mind because it keeps him talking. On the night before Lydia's 16th birthday, her father gives her a locket, but Lydia feels like the present is ruined by James' hints that it is trendy. The next day, Lydia begins to suspect Louisa and James are having an affair, and she also fails her driver's permit test.

In July 1977, James is hurrying home from Louisa's apartment. He and Marilyn have an angry confrontation that ends in him storming off and telling her that they should pretend like their marriage and children never happened. James drives to Toledo but turns around when he realizes that years ago when Marilyn left, she still came back and stayed.

Returning once more to May 1977, the narrative examines the final days in Lydia's life when she feels like Nath is blowing her off and minimizing her feelings. Lydia attempts to initiate a romantic encounter with Jack, but Jack rejects her and tells her about how he pines for Nath. Lydia decides to go out in a boat on the lake and step into the water, believing she can swim to shore. She drowns.

In July 1977 James returns home and he and Marilyn embrace and renew their love for one another. Hannah has begun to bond with her parents more. She follows Nath as he storms out to the lake after Jack. Nath tries to initiate a fight with Jack and punches him, but Hannah breaks it up before it can go any further. Hannah accidentally pushes Nath

in the water, and Nath feels a connection to how Lydia must have felt in her final moments alive. Seeing Hannah's face makes Nath feel like he has something to hold on to, and he swims ashore.



Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

Chapter 1 opens by introducing the four surviving members of the Lee family in the wake of the middle child Lydia's disappearance on a Tuesday morning in 1977. Although the readers immediately know that "Lydia is dead" from the first line of the chapter, the Lees do not initially know this, and this first chapter explores how the family learns that Lydia has died. At the breakfast table, Lydia's older brother Nathan ("Nath") and younger sister Hannah trade details of 16-year-old Lydia the night before. Marilyn, the mother, is anxious but does not hint at her anxiety to the Nath and Hannah. She sends them off to school and then calls Lydia's school only to find that Lydia was not in her first period class. Marilyn continues to search the house, even opening the cupboards, before she gives up and calls her husband, James, at his office. James grades papers from his office at the local Middlewood College, where he is a history professor. His teaching assistant, Louisa, greets him, and they exchange remarks about the students' lack of success on the essays. Stanley Hewitt, a fellow professor, walks into the room, pushing Louisa out with his comment that "Didn't mean to interrupt anything." Marilyn speaks with James and asks him to come home.

By this point the Lees decide to call the police, but they do not seem concerned about Lydia's disappearance and classify it as a missing-person case. The Lees do not find this comforting. At one point the police mention how Marilyn had gone missing in 1966. Nath thinks to himself that their neighbor, Jack, is potentially responsible since he had been spending time with Lydia recently. James and Marilyn call Lydia's classmates, who they believe to be her close friends, only to discover that she had not spoken with them for ages, a fact that Nath already knows. Nath considers Lydia's behavior the night before, and the scene shifts to Hannah, who runs over in her mind the previous night. She distinctly remembers the puzzling sound of the front door closing at 2 a.m. the night before. James calls the police again the next day, but they have no leads. Later that afternoon someone notices that the boat in the local lake is floating out in the middle of the water. The police ask if Lydia had ever played in the boat, and James says of course not because she did not know how to swim. At the close of the chapter, it is Thursday and the police have dragged the lake and found Lydia's body.

The start of Chapter 2 begins by telling the backstory of how Marilyn and James met at Harvard in 1957. Marilyn is studying at Radcliffe, the women's college at Harvard, and wants to study physics, but she faces opposition and sexism from her advisor and classmates. She is staunchly opposed to ending up like her mother, Doris, a single parent who teaches home economics at her high school and believes the most important career for a woman is a housewife. Her mother is proud of her for going to Radcliffe because she is convinced Marilyn will meet a husband there. As a matter of fact, in the fall of 1957 she meets James, her professor for a history course on the American cowboy, which she soon transferred out of after they began a romantic



relationship. She is as surprised as her classmates that James P. Lee is a Chinese-American.

The focus shifts to James as we learn about his background and childhood growing up at the son of Chinese immigrants. James' father moves his family to Iowa so he and James' mother can work at a private school which James eventually attends. James never feels comfortable with his classmates and always feels like an outsider among them. He goes on to attend Harvard for undergraduate and graduate school. In 1957 he meets Marilyn and makes small changes in himself, such as painting the walls of his apartment and getting his haircut, to try to be more American for her. He keeps details of his Chinese heritage a secret from her. In the spring of 1958, James learns that he did not get a permanent position to teach at Harvard, and Marilyn learns she is pregnant with Nath. She abandons her hopes for medical school and marries James instead. The morning of the wedding, Doris tells Marilyn that she will change her mind and regret marrying James later because James is not like her. This is the last time Marilyn ever sees her mother.

Analysis

Immediately readers learn that the Lee house is dependent upon secret truths, desires, and resentments which do not get voiced. And yet, the reader is welcomed into an essential truth right away, that Lydia is dead. As readers see, Lydia is much more a mystery to her parents than to her brother and sister; James and Marilyn are under the impression that Lydia has plenty of friends at school, yet they discover what Nath knows--Lydia is not close to any of the girls the parents call. Nath knows this just like he knows Lydia sat alone in the cafeteria. Furthermore, he does not reveal his suspicions about their neighbor Jack even though he believes this may be crucial to solving Lydia's disappearance. Likewise, Hannah chooses not to say anything about how she heard the front door open at 2 a.m. the night before because she does not want to upset anyone. Marilyn is aware of Lydia's secrecy and traces it back to when she was a child and first learned to stand, catching her mother by surprise at how fast she had grown up. At one point Marilyn laments Lydia's recent closed-off behavior.

Early on the connection between Marilyn and Lydia is made apparent as Nath sees so much of his sister in his mother's face. Lydia is the only one of the Lee children who inherited her mother's blue eyes, a trait which should help her assimilate better and yet does not. This distinct comparison between Lydia and her mother underlines the importance of the theme of heredity which runs throughout the book. Marilyn repeatedly tries to make Lydia in her image and applies a crippling pressure on her to succeed and fulfill her own hopes and aspirations that were dashed when she became pregnant with Nath.

At the university readers are introduced to James' teaching assistant, Louisa Chen. Louisa is James' first Chinese student in 18 years of teaching at Middlewood, a fact that makes him smile. He recognizes her naivety and innocent outlook and seems to cherish the novelty of it. Louisa has also remarked with confusion about how Marilyn is not



Chinese. The attraction between Louisa and James is hinted at subtly by their ease of conversation and the gentleness with which he plucks a ladybug from her hair before Stanley Hewitt interrupts them.

A police officer alludes to when Marilyn went missing in 1966, an important episode which will be explained in a later chapter. In answer to the officer's question, James replies that the whole matter was a misunderstanding, a family matter. This theme of going missing parallels that of Lydia and once again draws the comparison between mother and daughter. In the encounter with the police the Lees have difficulty picking out a picture of Lydia, foreshadowing two important days in Lydia's life: Christmas 1976 and her birthday a week before. Lydia's unhappiness is hinted at by the difficulty they have selecting a picture where she looks happy and content.

Marilyn's relationship with her mother parallels her relationship with Lydia as the reader later comes to see. Marilyn's mother believes that the best path for a woman and for Marilyn is to marry a man and make him happy, a quest she reinforces when she says in congratulating Marilyn upon her acceptance to Radcliffe that she will meet a good Harvard man there. Marilyn rebels against her mother's hopes for her by deliberately trying to fail home ec and choosing to study physics with hopes to enter medical school. Later, Marilyn will dictate Lydia's future by pressuring her into taking advanced classes in physics, science, and mathematics and buying her medical reference books all to encourage her to become a doctor just like Marilyn wanted to be. At first Marilyn does not resent the fact that she ended up exactly like her mother told her she would: married. Yet, as the novel progresses we see that Marilyn has profound regret that she did not pursue medicine, a regret that she acts on. Likewise, the stinging shame about his background that James feels at the hands of his bullying classmates foreshadows the teasing his own children will experience. It seems, then, that the Lee children have inherited more than just genetics from their parents. In this way it seems their futures are almost predestined.

Marilyn's attraction to James is partially based on her belief that he understands what it is like to stand out. On the other hand, James chooses Marilyn partially because he sees her as a chance to assimilate, as confirmation that America was welcoming him. The mark on the wall that Marilyn leaves while they make love also foreshadows the mark on the ceiling that Lydia and Nath create while they are children.

As much as Marilyn fights against her mother's criticisms of James, her mother successfully plants doubts in her daughter's mind about the suitability of her future husband. Her words will continue to haunt Marilyn long after they are married. James will forever linger on Marilyn's passing comment to James that, "Oh, my mother just thinks I should marry someone more like me." It is a statement that will come up again and again throughout the novel including in the final chapter.



Discussion Question 1

How does telling the reader in the very first line that Lydia is dead subvert typical conventions of a mystery? By the end of the first chapter, what would you say is the dominant mystery for the novel to explore?

Discussion Question 2

What does James represent to Marilyn? What does Marilyn represent to James? How do you think the initial factors that drew them to each other will affect their marriage?

Discussion Question 3

What does the author mean by opening Chapter 2 with "How had it begun? Like everything: with mothers and fathers." What ways do you see how James and Marilyn will affect their children's lives this early on?

Vocabulary

kidnapped, elfish, sagely, romper, coax, loping, obliterated, mooring, laudable, sweltering, pedigree, dichotomy, snicker, parquet, prospect, imposter, deftness



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

As Chapter 3 opens, the Lees are attending Lydia's funeral. Many of Lydia's classmates come to the funeral, as do several professors from Middlewood. At the funeral Nath sees Jack and wonders if he should tell the police about his suspicions that Jack was involved in Lydia's death. Nath approaches Jack after the service is over and demands to know what Jack and Lydia were doing together the day before she went missing. Jack denies any involvement, and the tension between the two almost escalates into a fight. James breaks it up and scolds Jack for his behavior, telling him he can walk home. As he is slumped against an elm tree, Nath considers Jack's reputation for being a heartbreaker and player among the high school girls. While walking home, Nath overhears a conversation between Jack, his mother, Dr. Janet Wolff, and a policeman.

At his office James reviews Lydia's autopsy, which was given to him by the police. There were no signs of foul play in Lydia's case, and the official cause of death was asphyxiation by drowning. Louisa enters the room, still wearing her dress from the funeral. Louisa invites him to her apartment so she can cook him lunch. James agrees and they sleep together. As they are making love James notes how everything is different with her. He eventually falls asleep in her bed. At home, Marilyn is feeling restless and wanders into Lydia's room. She observes her books and poster of Einstein and walks over to the shelf of her journals. She is convinced that they will hold the key to her daughter's disappearance, but as she opens each one she sees that they are completely blank. Marilyn, puzzled, remembers the time Lydia told her that she did not have any secrets. As the chapter closes she resolves to solve the mystery of Lydia's disappearance and death.

Chapter 4 begins by flashing back to 1965 when Lydia and Nath are just children and Marilyn accompanies James to his university's holiday party. At the party Marilyn feels a pull to resume her education and pursue her medical ambitions. Marilyn bumps into Tom Lawson, a chemistry professor. Tom mentions in passing that he is looking for a lab assistant. Marilyn tells him she is interested in the position, and Tom says they should talk about it in the new year. In the spring, Marilyn learns her mother has died. She had not spoken to her mother since her wedding to James eight years before. She admits to James that she is sad and drives to her mother's home to see to her affairs. The only object she feels any connection to and keeps is her mother's beloved Betty Crocker cookbook. Marilyn reviews her mother's notes within the book. On her drive home she reflects on her mother's life. In the midst of a rain storm Marilyn pulls over to the side of the road and gets out of the car to relish the cleansing rain. She promises herself that she will never end up like her mother.

At home, James tends to the children while Marilyn is away on her trip to her mother's. He takes Nath to the pool so he can learn how to swim, and he actively encourages Nath to join the other children in the pool. Nath does get in the pool and plays marco



polo with his peers. James thinks about how Nath reminds him of himself when he was younger. When he is "It" Nath is teased by the other children and eventually called a racial slur for Chinese Americans. Jack eventually rescues Nath, but his smile rubs Nath the wrong way and he takes offense. Meanwhile, James feels only shame and embarrassment because of his son's failure to fit in. When Marilyn gets home she calls Tom about the assistant position, but Tom says he has already hired someone and did not realize she was serious about it. Marilyn is disturbed by this and takes a drive around town to calm down, ultimately ending up at the hospital. She realizes that the Dr. Wolff the staff are referring to is Jack's mother. The fact that Dr. Wolff is a woman startles Marilyn and makes her reevaluate her perceptions of doctors. The thought suddenly occurs to her that she could do that, that she could be a doctor, too, if only she could lose her husband and children. Marilyn slowly starts to plan to detach from her family and pursue her ambitions. She enrolls in pre-med prerequisites at a community college and rents an efficiency apartment. She leaves them in May. On her last night in the house she and James make love. The next day she writes a note to James that she is unhappy with her life and that it did not turn out the way she wanted it to. Marilyn tears up the note, however, and throws it in the trashcan. The chapter ends with Lydia, Nath, and James discovering that Marilyn has disappeared.

Analysis

Chapter 3 explores themes of tension and contrasts the ways tension is escalated between Nath and Jack and the ways it is resolved between Lydia and James. Nath releases some of his frustration with Jack at the graveyard, and his passionate anger at Jack nearly erupts into a physical fight. A close reading of their conversation reveals that Jack is anxious that Nath knows Lydia was with him that Monday afternoon and his fear that she told him something which is not immediately made clear. Nath is frustrated with Jack, but Jack does not seem upset with him. In Chapter 4 we learn more about the foundation for Nath's resentment and how it stems from the episode in the community pool when Jack saved him from further embarrassment. Nath caught Jack smiling and believed he was mocking him. The reader later learns that Jack has always had an interest in Nath and has only ever approached him with good intentions. In contrast, in Chapter 3 the romantic tension between James and Louisa is resolved when they sleep together. Louisa initiates the encounter but James is just as active a participant and even finds solace within her embrace. He notes how different things feel with Louisa, and he feels so comfortable at her apartment that he is able to sleep soundly for the first time since they found Lydia's body. James is able to relax with Louisa because her Chinese roots are similar to his. He does not feel like an "other" to her. On the other hand, Louisa is an "other" to him. Though they are both Chinese American, she seems exotic compared to Marilyn.

When Marilyn is in Lydia's room, she is confronted with the possibility that she did not know her daughter after all. Initially, she does not focus on answering the question of who Lydia was but instead laments who she could have been. The shock at opening her diaries to find the pages blank stuns Marilyn. Marilyn is convinced that this is where she will find the answer to Lydia's disappearance, and yet she finds none. Lydia's perception



of herself is evident by her statement that she does not have any secrets. As the chapter closes Marilyn resolves to find out who was responsible for Lydia's death. She seeks knowledge above all else, and as it becomes increasingly apparent that she is lacking an understanding of her daughter Marilyn becomes more and more unsettled.

Chapter 4 details the extent to which Marilyn was unhappy in the eighth year of her marriage and motherhood. At the holiday party she feels awkward because she does not have a career and people only expect her to talk about her children. She feels she is defined only to the extent of her relationships with her husband and children, and she is enthusiastic about the possibility to work in the lab even though the chemistry professor does not take her interest seriously. She still longs to become a doctor. This chapter shows the consistency within Marilyn's character. She desired to be a doctor all throughout college and even now when she is faced with an identity crisis.

When her mother dies, Marilyn again questions who she is and what she does. While pondering her mother's legacy in the car during the rain storm, she settles on the fact that in the end her mother would only be known for what she cooked for other people. Marilyn's promise to herself that she will not end up like her mother is a theme that runs throughout her relationship with Lydia. Marilyn seeks to have an identity apart from her mother's and takes radical steps to do so by leaving her family and enrolling in classes to take her remaining pre-med prerequisites. She is haunted by her presumption that Dr. Wolff, Jack's mother, is a man, and she sees in her a tantalizing possibility to become a doctor like her. Yet she actively steers Lydia's life to shape her future in her image and failed aspirations. In her mind, Marilyn must be different than her mother. She applies pressure to Lydia to not end up like her and ultimately not end up like her own mother. In the end it is revealed that Lydia buckles under this stress and cannot cope with the weight of her mother living vicariously through her.

James' shame at the incident with Nath at the community pool reinforces the theme of failure that runs throughout the novel. Just as Marilyn fails to become a doctor and Lydia fails physics, to James his son has failed to assimilate into American culture just as he himself has. James does not want his son to end up like him in a similar way to which Marilyn does not want her daughter to end up like her. Both parents are miserable at where they are in life, Marilyn for her failure to have a career and identity apart from her home life and James from his failure to be accepted as American by his peers. The reader sees the extent to his disappointment in his son when James lists all the things he wishes Nath could do and yet has not done.

Discussion Question 1

How does Lydia's remark that she does not have any secrets contradict what we have learned about her so far?



Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator continually ask the question "Was she sad?" after the death of Marilyn's mother?

Discussion Question 3

How does James, Nath, and Lydia's reaction to Marilyn's desertion resemble or differ from their reaction to Lydia's disappearance?

Vocabulary

bewilderment, eulogy, circumference, crevice, sheaf, suffuse, tenure, calloused, pockmarked, puncture, sullen, bristle, prostrate, solicitously, tentative, lavish



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Chapter 5 opens with describing the ritual which Hannah undertakes since Lydia died. Struggling to understand her sister's disappearance, Hannah retraces her sister's steps each night. She starts by unlocking the front door and leaving the house at 2 a.m. like Lydia did. Then she walks to the lake and tries to imagine what her sister was thinking and what it felt like to row out to the center of the lake and drown. When Hannah returns home from her excursion she lifts up the covers of Lydia's bed and pulls out a locket which Lydia had hidden. The locket was given to her by her father for her birthday, and Hannah stole it while she was still alive. Lydia scolded her for taking it and told her to never wear it. At the end of the night Hannah reflects how she knows she will continue to do this each night.

The next morning Marilyn and James fight over who had left the door unlocked the night before. They bicker about the cause of Lydia's death. Marilyn still believes that someone murdered her while James is beginning to suspect that his daughter died at her own hands. He flashes back to the local newspaper story about Lydia which mentions her loner status and the fact that she and Nath were the only ones at school who were Chinese American. The police arrive at the Lee residence and admit that there are no leads. Marilyn, hysterical, demands that they keep looking for a suspect. The police decide to question Nath further and try to glean from him if Lydia was depressed, hit by their parents, and in the habit of sneaking out. Nath answers their questions and keeps his suspicions about Jack silent. He begins to cry. Back inside the house Marilyn and James fight about Marilyn's right to speak up. Marilyn counters that James was "kowtowing" to the police, a word that deeply shames him. He leaves for the college, and Nath comes back inside. Nath and Hannah go to the lake. James flees to Louisa's apartment. Angry, Marilyn resumes her search of Lydia's room and discovers a box of condoms in her backpack. She vows to find out what happened. At the lake, Hannah and Nath see Jack. Nath wishes to confront him, but Hannah stops him. He tells her how Lydia once fell in the lake when they were younger.

Chapter 6 begins by resuming the story of Marilyn's disappearance, which was also the summer when Lydia fell in the lake. James frantically calls the police each day and does his best to keep a confident face on for the Nath and Lydia, but he neglects responsibilities and lets them watch television all day. Meanwhile, James reads the note Marilyn wrote over and over again. He has pieced it together from the shreds in the wastebasket. Nath encounters Jack outside, and Jack gives him candy but his attempts to comfort Nath by telling him that he will be okay with just one parent backfire. Nath sees the launch of the spaceship Gemini 9 on television and is mesmerized. The broadcast leaves a deep impression on him, and he begins to research everything he can about astronauts and space missions. He tells James of his wonder about space travel one night at dinner, and James slaps him across the face, berating him for thinking about space at a time like this. Lydia has taken to reading the red Betty Crocker



cookbook each morning. She resolves to do whatever her mother wanted if her mother were ever to return.

Marilyn is having trouble focusing on her studies and distracts herself by calling home several times just to hear her family's voices before hanging up without saying a word. She nearly faints twice and cuts her hand on the sidewalk from her fall. Marilyn goes to the emergency room to get stitches and mistakes her doctor for a nurse because she was expecting a man. It occurs to Marilyn that she could be pregnant. The hospital runs tests and confirms this. James drives to the hospital, overjoyed to see Marilyn again and happy with the news that she is pregnant. Upon her arrival home Lydia claims she lost the cookbook, which pleases Marilyn. Lydia is happy her mother is home and looks forward to her cooking, but Marilyn never cooks again after her return. She begins to introduce Lydia to books about science and medicine. At the lake one day Nath, overcome with jealousy at how everything has started to orbit around Lydia, pushes her into the lake. He rescues her from drowning. The chapter closes by describing family competitions that none of the Lees won at a school picnic in August.

Analysis

Hannah's recreation of Lydia's death reinforces the theme of inheritance and following in someone's footsteps. Just as Lydia was to complete what Marilyn could not--becoming a doctor--Hannah tries to understand her sister's final hours by literally retracing her steps. This is really the first time that the readers get to see things from Hannah's perspective for an extended period of time, and readers understand that she lives almost exclusively in relation to her sister. Similarly, at the end of Chapter 6, readers see how Nathan begins to be situated in relation to Lydia, who becomes the dominant attraction of their parents' attention. There is also an abundance of foreshadowing as the locket is mentioned in Chapter 5 but the story behind the locket is revealed in a later chapter. For now readers only know that a disagreement happened between Lydia and Hannah, that Lydia received the locket as a birthday gift on her last birthday, somehow it broke and that she hid it away.

Also in Chapter 5 readers start to see the aggressiveness with which Hannah pursues preserving Jack from Nath's rage. At this point in the novel readers are left to wonder if she has a crush on Jack and that it why she is protecting him from Nath, but in a short time we will see the secret about Jack that she has unearthed and is trying hard not to reveal. In this way readers also see some of Hannah's personality as the peacemaker. Hannah rarely contributes her own opinions, desires, or wishes to her family members and instead speaks in a secret language of her own: physically preventing her brother from harming Jack, attempting to live in her big sister's shoes by retracing her last hours before she died, and staying silent around their parents to avoid deflecting attention off Lydia. Later in the novel readers will see how she attempts to physically be close to her family members, closer than if they actually opened up and shared their feelings with each other, by stealing small mementos from them.



The bickering between James and Marilyn over the cause of Lydia's death shows just how strained their relationship has become in the aftermath of the tragedy. Marilyn yet again struggles to define herself as something other than just a "hysterical housewife." She feels like she should own her identity as someone who asks valid and reasonable questions to the police. Her statement to James, in which she suggested he was "kowtowing" to the police, devastates him. It confirms his worst feelings about himself, that others see him as the submissive foreigner. He returns yet again to the newspaper story about Lydia's death, focusing on a statement that is burned into his mind: that Lydia was one of only two Chinese students in the high school and that she had few friends. It seems that James' hopes for his children to assimilate into American culture have been dashed, as neither Lydia nor Nath succeeding in fitting in or becoming popular.

Outside, Nath is questioned by the police and moved to tears when he realizes how strange his family looks from the outside and how little he knew his sister. He is filled regret at their recent fighting. When he and Hannah go to the lake the next day, he is reminded again of his focused and intense hatred for Jack. Hannah stops him from lashing out but does not really explain why she is so passionate about it. This gives the reader a hint that she has something invested in the relationship between the two boys, something that will be revealed in a later chapter.

Meanwhile, Marilyn discovers the condoms and begins to realize that she did not know Lydia as well as she thought she did. She breezed through questions from the police, answering with certainty that Lydia had not had a boyfriend but now that is shown to be potentially false.

Chapter 6 shows the reactions of the Lee family in the wake of Marilyn's abandonment. James blames himself and is especially bothered when a police officer implies that being in an interracial relationship was too much for Marilyn. "This kind of thing happens sometimes. Sometimes people are just too different," the policeman says casually to James. The word "different" will get repeated later by James when he bitterly accuses Marilyn of making a mistake in marrying him because he was too different, and the word "differently" is the final word in Marilyn's torn-up goodbye note to her family.

Meanwhile, Lydia and Nath stick together at school and spend hours zoning out in front of the television while James locks himself in his study to read and reread Marilyn's farewell note and ponder how it all happened. One day after school, Jack says something devastating to Nath that further deepens Nath's distaste for Jack. "You'll be okay. My mom says you only need one parent. She says if my dad doesn't care enough to see me, it's his loss, not mine," Jack says, trying to cheer him up. Nath is speechless, then storms off. The suggestion that Marilyn does not care about his life is unthinkable for Nath.

At this point, Nath and Lydia each withdraw into different outlets. Nath becomes enthralled with the Gemini 9 space mission and listens to coverage day and night. Nath consumes information about the mission, space travel, and astronomy. He is excited by the prospect of traveling somewhere where one's problems on earth are impossible to



see. Lydia begins to study her mother's red Betty Crocker cookbook, which Marilyn had flipped through every day before she left. Lydia notes the highlighted anecdotes about entertaining and does not realize that they were made by her grandmother and not her mother. She makes a promise to herself that has repercussions for the rest of her life: if her mother comes home, Lydia will do whatever she wants for her as long as she stays.

Over in Toledo, Marilyn is trying to concentrate on studying but is distracted by her family, whom she calls constantly without ever saying anything. On July 3 she faints at home and then again later at the grocery store, which leads her to the hospital. When she begins to suspect she is pregnant, Marilyn begins to cry. That her doctor is a woman is a cruel reinforcement of what Marilyn now accepts as the permanent death of her dream to become a doctor. James comes to retrieve her, and Marilyn knows she will never have the strength to leave her family again.

When she reunites with her mother, Lydia tells her she lost her cookbook, which Marilyn takes as Lydia's rejection of the domestic life. This opens up an avenue for Marilyn to steer Lydia's future towards medicine, which she soon does by asking her math questions and buying her science reference books. Lydia, who at heart believed that Marilyn had disappeared because of something she and Nath had done, does whatever her mother asks, fixating on being obedient. Nath begins to suspect that Lydia is now the favored child, and by trying to push her off the dock at the lake attempts to get rid of Lydia so the balance can once again be restored. Yet Nath repents and tries to save her, helping her ashore. At the close of the chapter, the narrator notes how Nath and Lydia will each interpret that moment differently, and indeed, it is later where Lydia will pinpoint where everything went wrong in her life. At the close of Chapter 6, the reader sees how momentous choices early on end up steering the course of the Lees' lives.

Discussion Question 1

What does Hannah hope to discover by retracing Lydia's final hours? How does her approach to discovering Lydia's secrets match or differ from Marilyn's efforts?

Discussion Question 2

What secrets or unvoiced feelings emerge in this section? How does this theme fit into the title of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Does Marilyn see her return to the family as a defeat? How do her feelings about reuniting with her family compare to James, Lydia, and Nath's reactions?

Vocabulary

bewildered, belated, umbrage, berate, kowtow, palpable, enlightenment, culpability, indefinitely, waft, billow, plume, gullet, surreptitiously, talisman, yearn, suture



Chapters 7 - 8

Summary

Chapter 7 advances the plot by ten years. The narrator describes how Marilyn and James orient themselves around Lydia and the promise for a better future that she offers for the whole family. James sees her as solace from the daily reminders of how he is an outcast, and Marilyn sees Lydia as a brilliant student and future doctor. At dinner, Nath and Hannah are treated as afterthoughts. Lydia agrees to all the things her parents push on her: taking summer classes, going to school dances, enrolling in college biology classes. The reader learns during the children's winter break that Lydia has been failing physics, her grades dropping with each exam, and now she has to have her mother sign her failed exam in acknowledgement of her daughter's struggles. Lydia has put it off for weeks. Yet, what frightens Lydia more is the letter she has snatched from the mail and hid from her family is an acceptance letter to Harvard for Nath. After Marilyn disappeared and then returned, Lydia has been virtually friendless, and sticking close to Nath when they are at school saves her from complete social isolation. As Lydia ruminates over the letter, Jack comes to the door and hands Nath an envelope that was accidentally delivered to his house. It is a second notice about Nath's acceptance to Harvard. As Nath celebrates with his family, Lydia calls down from upstairs that she is failing physics.

After enduring her mother's fury, Lydia tries to reconcile with Nath, but he rejects her while Marilyn forces Lydia to study physics with her. Over break, Nath and Lydia settle into a pattern of ignoring each other. On Christmas morning, Lydia receives a medical textbook from her mother, and James gives her books on building social skills. Lydia tries to seem grateful and excited by her parents' presents, but Nath can see through her facade and feels a twinge of pity. Lydia reminisces about her failed attempts to make friends with other girls her age over the years and about the countless times she pretended to be on the phone with friends but she was in fact talking to the dial tone. When school resumes, Lydia bonds with Jack over their struggles in physics. Lydia takes a calculated approach to befriending Jack, and over time the two of them spend time together in his car after school. Jack frequently mentions Nath, and he introduces her to cigarettes. Lydia is surprised by her honesty in being upfront about her feelings when Jack asks her questions about her life and how she feels about being the only Chinese family in Middlewood. As the chapter ends, Lydia has begun to lie to her family about what she does after school.

Chapter 8 opens by describing how James seeks solace in carrying on his affair with Louisa after Lydia's death. He lies to Marilyn and claims that he is meeting with students for a summer class that he is not in fact teaching. One afternoon James comes home and demands to know where Marilyn is. Nath makes a tentative suggestion that James has been with other women, and James grips Nath and accuses him of being negligent in preventing Lydia's death. On July 3rd, the policeman in charge of Lydia's case calls to inform James they are ruling Lydia's death a suicide. Marilyn finds out and argues



passionately with James, for she cannot accept that Lydia killed herself. Marilyn notes that if Lydia were a white girl they would keep searching for a murderer, while James says that if Lydia were a white girl this never would have happened. He voices his suspicions that Marilyn should have married someone else, indicating that their marriage and children were a mistake. James flees to Louisa's apartment, where she offers him Chinese buns that prompt him to speak his first words of Chinese in forty years. As they make love James tells Louisa that she is the girl he should have married.

Nath and Hannah learn from Marilyn that Lydia's death was a suicide, and Nath calls the police to voice his suspicions about Jack, but they do not believe him. At home, Hannah reminisces about the previous summer when she observed a tender moment between Jack and Nath at the lake. Jack was sitting with them, and when a bead of water dripped down Nath's body and landed on Jack's hand, he brought it to his mouth and licked it like it was honey. This communicates to Hannah that Jack has strong feelings for Nath, possibly even romantic attraction. Meanwhile, at home Marilyn is shocked by what James has implied and cannot disagree more. She would have always chosen this life despite their tragic fates. On July 4th, Hannah and Marilyn are wondering where James could be. Nath reveals his suspicions that James might be carrying on an affair. Stunned, Marilyn realizes it could only be Louisa. Rather than calling Louisa, Marilyn goes to her apartment and sees James' car there. She says to Louisa, who covers for James, "If you see him, tell my husband that I'll see him at home."

Analysis

Chapter 7 reveals just how deeply unsettled Lydia is at present day. Lydia is described by the narrator as "the reluctant center of their universe" who every day "held the world together" for her family. Yet whereas in Chapter 6 Lydia enthusiastically promised herself that she would do whatever her mother would ask her as long as she would stay here, in Chapter 7, readers see ten years have passed and the cracks are beginning to show. Of most immediate alarm to outsiders is that Lydia is failing physics, a fact that she has to soon reveal to her mother lest her teacher intervene. Although Lydia knows Marilyn will be shocked--and furious--Lydia herself is not really surprised. She has not told anyone that her grades have been slipping all fall, that the failing grade was inevitable. However much she dreads telling her mother about her struggles with Marilyn's pet subject of physics, Lydia is more disturbed by the letter intended for Nath which she filched from the mail the previous week. Lydia has seized and stashed away the acceptance letter to Harvard that Nath received in a desperate attempt to prevent him from leaving. When Nath receives a second letter from Jack, who has brought it to the Lee house after it had been misdelivered, Nath is granted a rare moment of congratulations from Marilyn and James. Lydia can tell what is going on from upstairs and chooses then to deliver the blow that she is failing physics knowing full well that it will turn the attention back on her and deflect it from Nath's accomplishment.

From what the reader has seen of Lydia's character, this does not seem like a malicious or jealous act. Rather, Lydia is faced with losing Nath; to her, Nath leaving for college



hits the same wounds she nursed after Marilyn abandoned them. However, Lydia was able to survive Marilyn's absence by having her brother as a companion day and night. Even when Marilyn returned home Lydia and Nath stuck together with a fierce bond that smoothed over the racist remarks of their peers and made more bearable their positions as social outcasts.

Throughout Chapter 7, Lydia remembers the painful encounters she has had with her classmates over the years. Lydia felt she could prevent her parents from leaving her if she did whatever they wanted. However, she knows that realistically nothing she could do would prevent Nath from leaving. Nath, in turn, is repulsed by Lydia's dirty trick to bring the attention back on her by announcing her struggles in school. Throughout much of winter break, Lydia and Nath's relationship is strained and he rarely initiates conversation with her. As much as Nath wanted to please his father by getting into Harvard, Nath genuinely does want to go to college so he can get out of their tense house and study physics.

When the children return to school, Lydia is depressed. She strikes up a conversation with Jack, who is also in her physics class and, like her, barely passing, and begins to target Jack as a new friend. Lydia is attracted to Jack and the danger he represents. Jack is known for having a new girlfriend each week, and Lydia is thrilled and nervous with how badly spending time with him could damage her reputation. Yet Lydia wants to become a new person and distance herself from the brainiac person everyone thinks she is and expects her to be. Smoking cigarettes in Jack's car after school, Lydia opens up to the boy who her brother hates. Jack seems genuinely interested in Lydia's life and especially Nath, whom he asks countless questions about. At the close of the chapter, the reader sees how Lydia's behavior has become more rebellious, for she is now telling her mother she is staying after school to do extra credit works for physics.

Chapter 8 opens by showing that James has come unhinged in the wake of Lydia's death. James' behavior has become erratic. He lies to his family about teaching a nonexistent summer class whereas in reality he takes solace in Louisa's arms every day while other times he feels like killing himself by driving into a tree. The family has insulated themselves from him and stay out of his way. James and Nath's tense conversation, wherein Nath offers the slightest suggestion that James' "meetings" involve encounters with other women, lead James to accuse Nath of being responsible for Lydia's death by not knowing the depth of her sorrow: "You don't know anything about my life. Just like you didn't know anything about your sister's." This statement shocks Nath into silence. James does not really hold Nath responsible; he blames himself above all, something he reveals in his conversation with Marilyn soon after.

The police call later that afternoon and confirm that they believe Lydia's death was a suicide. James seeks closure in this conclusion, but Marilyn fights with him and refuses to believe her daughter would commit suicide. James understands why Lydia would commit suicide to an extent that Marilyn never would because she does not have the rest of her family's Asian appearance. James knows the horrible ridicule that Chinese Americans have to face, something that Marilyn has never been able to fully grasp. When they fight over whether or not it was suicide, James leaves Marilyn with the



thought that her mother was right, that she should have married someone more like her. James leaves the house and goes to Louisa. James says that Louisa is the kind of girl he should have married, meaning Chinese American.

Nath refuses to let go of his suspicions that Jack is responsible for Lydia's death and even calls the police to tell them that. Hannah observes her brother silently and later thinks about how wrong her brother is about Jack. When Hannah witnessed the moment Jack licked a water drop from Nath, she became privy to Jack's secret, that he is in love with Nath. As the reader has seen by now, Hannah is an extremely perceptive child who often reads between the lines and understands the subtext of the facial expressions, actions, and words of those around her. Hannah's function in this capacity is to show how secrets can be communicated wordlessly. In other words, she shows us how someone can still be perceptive even while navigating all the things "I never told you."

As the chapter closes, Nath voices his suspicions about James having an affair, and Marilyn tracks him down at Louisa's apartment. Rather than making a scene, Marilyn tries to coax James back home by making him look ridiculous. By going to retrieve James rather than calling Louisa, Marilyn unconsciously mimics his going to retrieve her from Toledo 10 years earlier. Now we see that both parents have abandoned their families at some point.

Discussion Question 1

How would you describe the Lee household's family dynamics, and how does Nath's acceptance to Harvard threaten to dislodge its fragile harmony?

Discussion Question 2

What are Lydia's motives for befriending Jack?

Discussion Question 3

What makes Nath suggest that his father is spending time with women other than Marilyn, and how does James' reaction convey his state of mind in wake of Lydia's death?

Vocabulary

willowy, omission, frictionless, bulbous, erode, chafe, antecedent, intercede, buffer, loll, gawk, festoon, prickle, waxen, plummet, coax, console, nape



Chapters 9 - 10

Summary

Chapter 9 opens a few months earlier when Lydia and Jack's time together prompts rumors from their peers at school. In fact, Lydia and Jack's time together is more platonic. Together they trade stories about the struggles in their lives, their childhoods, and smoke cigarettes. Jack constantly asks questions about Nath. Jack also tries to teach Lydia how to drive a car, but she is helpless at it because she is too impatient. Lydia cannot get away from her home life fast enough. One afternoon, Lydia comes home and plays music loudly. Marilyn comes in the room, turns it down, and begins to lecture Lydia on the importance of succeeding in high school. Marilyn tells her she can do anything she wants, and that is all she wants her to remember after she has died. Later, Nath catches Lydia in the act of opening his mail, which is in fact a letter inviting him to come to an overnight at Harvard. Nath chides Lydia and tells her that opening that will not prevent him from leaving and that he cannot wait to get out their house.

Days later, on the eve of Lydia's sixteenth birthday, James gives her a beautiful silver locket with a picture of her and a picture of him inside. The next day she wears the necklace to her driving test. Louisa, who is in the car getting a ride from James, tells Lydia she picked it out. As Lydia observes Louisa and James' behavior, she is struck with certainty that they are sleeping together. Lydia takes her driver's permit exam but blanks out during the test and fails. At home, Marilyn is working on decorating Lydia's birthday cake with Hannah. Lydia comes home and admits that she failed the exam and did not get her permit. Genuinely stunned, Marilyn tells her it is not the end of the world and that she should go clean up and get ready for dinner. Lydia puts on a smile that seems so artificial it frightens Hannah, but nobody else notices. Hannah is not shocked. She had stolen Lydia's study guide a few weeks ago. She figures that if Lydia really wanted to study she would have said something. When Lydia returns to the table and puts on a front that nothing is wrong, Hannah can see right through it and understands that something has shifted in her sister, something sinister.

Chapter 10 brings the story back to present and picks up with James hurrying out of Louisa's apartment as he races home to try to salvage his marriage. Marilyn, furious, belittles him and characterizes Louisa as a girl whose sole goal is marriage to a man like James. James accuses Marilyn of never knowing what it is like to be different and to stand out in a room. Marilyn tells him of her time in the science classrooms when she was the only female and would be harassed by the men and instructors. Marilyn says she hopes Louisa would not regret a marriage to James, and he is enraged by the suggestion that she regrets their marriage. James stalks off and leaves the family after Marilyn tells him to leave. His parting words tell Marilyn that they should pretend their marriage never happened. Downstairs, a desperate Hannah cannot voice her feelings and make Nath stay as he storms out of the house. Upstairs, Marilyn begins to tear apart Louisa's room and is taken aback when she finds the Betty Crocker cookbook stashed away. Hannah finds her mother and the two embrace.



Nath buys whiskey at the liquor store from a cashier who pities him. Nath drives to the county line and gets drunk. In his own car, James races towards Toledo figuring he will abandon his family just like Marilyn did those years before. Yet as he drives, James is contemplative of his relationship with Marilyn. He realizes that she had indeed wanted to be different and had not shied away from it. He had not realized he had stopped thinking of Marilyn as a creature of want and is puzzled by this feeling. Nath is discovered by a policeman who tells him it is time to go home.

Analysis

In Chapter 9 we learn the details of Jack and Lydia's friendship, which is primarily driven by conversations over cigarettes wherein they admit their deepest feelings and thoughts to each other. Besides the advantages of hanging out with Jack for Lydia's reputation among her peers, Lydia finds herself actually enjoying her companionship, something she was not expecting. Jack asks endless questions about Nath wanting to know all about his interests and motivations for studying astronomy. While Lydia feels bad about degrading Nath, she latches on to the opportunity it presents for spending more time with Jack. It seems that Jack is interested in spending time with Lydia as well and his ceaseless questions about Nath do not seem to be calculated consciously. Jack helps her study for her driver's permit test by allowing her to try to drive in his car, but Lydia is too impatient because, as she admits to herself, she cannot wait to get out of her house and leave all her family troubles behind.

Lydia is torn between being annoyed with her mother for telling her to remember that she can do anything she wants after Marilyn dies or feeling her compulsive anxiety and fear of abandonment that compels her to do whatever her mother wants. Later, after dinner, Lydia attempts to open and hide a letter to Nath from Harvard about an overnight visit, but Nath catches her in the act. His words to her that he is going to Harvard that weekend and in September no matter what sting Lydia bitterly. The more she thinks about Nath's departure for college in terms of physics--for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction--she feels more trapped and suffocated by having to face her parents alone.

James' gift of the locket is initially satisfying but then gradually pulls Lydia under the weight of her father's obsession with Lydia being popular and having friends. She knows her father loves her and is sincere in his efforts to help her, but she feels that she can never admit to him that she is friendless and shunned by her peers. The locket, then, becomes a reminder not only of Lydia's loneliness and isolation but also her father's immense demands on her to be more popular.

When Lydia rides in the car with Louisa and James on her birthday the next day she reads the chemistry between her father and his teaching assistant accurately. The realization clouds her mind, and she cannot focus on her driver's permit test, which she fails. At home, Lydia puts something between a grimace and a cheery smile on her face as her family brushes off her failure of the permit test not without concern. Hannah understands that something is grossly wrong with her sister as she observes her sister's



grotesque smile and barely composed manner. She believes Lydia is perched up high on a pedestal she will not be able to get off of without some significant, tragic incident. However, as is standard with Hannah's behavior, she does not approach her sister with her concern or her worries. The reader wonders if Hannah could have prevented Lydia's decision if she had not been so reserved. Hannah represents the danger of silence no doubt caused by constant negligence on the part of her her siblings and, especially, her parents.

In Chapter 10 James returns home, rushing out of Lydia's house and hoping to find Marilyn at home so he can talk through the revelation of his affair. Marilyn is indeed home and demands answers from James while also belittling Louisa. James, highly sensitive to any slights against his background, interprets Marilyn's comment that she thought he was someone different as meaning that she thought he was "different" as in Chinese American, an outsider and social outcast. He accuses her of having never understood what it was like to be different, and Marilyn counters with the pain she experienced from the targeted ridicule and pranks of her male classmates and professors in the science classrooms. Again Marilyn stirs James into a rage when she implies that Louisa might regret dropping everything to marry James. She throws him out of the house, and James tells her before he goes that they should pretend like their marriage never happened, that the children had never existed. In this conversation we see through James' eyes how touchy being "different" feels to him, that the slightest suggestion that he brings shame upon his family tears him to the core. At the same time, Marilyn is the one who remains level-headed throughout the argument. Her revelation of the pain she felt being the only female in the classroom is a part of her she has never shared with James. Marilyn, then, shows how she kept a painful past from her husband, who could not interpret the word "different" any other way than how it applies to his ethnicity and being the Chinese American outsider. His statement that they should forget their marriage ever happened belies regret more on his part than hers.

Downstairs, Hannah is distraught when Nath takes the other car and tears out of the driveway. Upstairs, Marilyn begins tearing down posters in Lydia's room. She knocks down the medical and science books on Lydia's shelves and is stunned to find her mother's Betty Crocker cookbook hidden away in the bookshelf. In this moment Marilyn realizes that Lydia had lied to her. She had not lost the cookbook; she had hid it from her mother so she would not have to deal with the pain it caused her. Remembering the experiments she did with Lydia, Marilyn realizes that Lydia had not loved science. She had loved experiments similar to cooking, an art and science of its own that Marilyn had never encouraged. She sees Hannah in the doorway and thinks it is Lydia at first, but then she opens her arms wide and envelops Hannah in a hug, suggesting that there is hope that Hannah can be loved by her parents and seen as something other than an invisible presence.

Nath buys whiskey at a store and then drives to the county line, where he consumes alcohol and throws up. Nath's actions are clearly desperate; he wants to lose himself to the oblivion of alcohol to forget his problems. When he is found by a policeman, Nath, moved, mistakes him for his father.



As he realizes he is driving to Toledo, James considers that Marilyn had never admitted that she did indeed regret their marriage. He had never considered her desires or indeed as a creature of want, a phrase that puzzles him the rest of his life.

Discussion Question 1

How does James' parenting style differ from Marilyn's, and is it more or less successful at bringing up emotionally healthy children?

Discussion Question 2

What kind of future is suggested when Marilyn hugs Hannah?

Discussion Question 3

Since James does not understand his realization that he had stopped thinking of Marilyn as a "creature of want," how do you interpret his feelings?

Vocabulary

illicit, sedate, docile, singeing, supple, writhe, banter, roil, gouge, preposterous, docile, glint, confine, careen, symmetry, stupor



Chapters 11 - 12

Summary

Chapter 11 opens in April when Nath was happily planning for his future at Harvard and his overnight visit to the school. Nath asks Lydia's opinion on a shirt he bought himself for the trip. Lydia picks the more reserved one. She is saddened by the growing realization that Nath is going to be leaving her soon; in some ways, it seems like he has already left. Later that night, Lydia goes to Nath's room to tell her about her suspicions with her father and Louisa, but she is stopped when Nath invites her to look at the stars with him. The next morning, Lydia asks Nath to call her during his trip to Harvard, which he is leaving for that day. She makes him promise to check in. However, Nath does not call, and Lydia feels paralyzed from being the center of her parent's intense and undeflected attention.

Hannah and Lydia spend more time together, but when Lydia sees Hannah wearing her locket, she smacks Hannah and tears the necklace off her sister's neck, breaking it intentionally. Lydia tells her never to smile if she does not want to, leaving her sister to analyze their bizarre conversation for the rest of her life. That evening Lydia calls her brother and is able to reach him, but he is drunk and mocks her and the emotions she is struggling with. Nath bitterly tells her that he does not have time for this and she should take her problems to Jack.

Lydia follows Nath's directions and attempts to initiate a sexual relationship with Jack the next day. Jack still only wants to ask questions about Nath. When Lydia awkwardly takes out his box of condoms from his glove compartment and kisses him, he reveals that he is in love with Nath. He tells her that he has covered up his feelings for Nath by putting up the facade that he is a womanizer. Horrified and mortified, Lydia flees and implies that she will tell other people Jack's secret. She comes home and snaps at Marilyn when Marilyn suggests they study together. That night, Lydia is puzzled by her day and her feelings and tries to pinpoint the moment when everything had gone wrong.

In the early morning hours Lydia realizes everything could have prevented had Nath let her drown in the lake when he pushed her into it ten years ago. She sneaks out of the house and goes to the dock. As she regards the lake and what she intends to do, she realizes Jack had been right earlier when he told her that she was afraid. She thinks about all the ways she has been afraid since her mother disappeared and returned ten years ago. She decides to row out into the middle of the lake and jump in the water, hoping to speak clearly to her family that which she never could say. At the close of the chapter, Lydia jumps in the water.

At the start of Chapter 12, James is driving as fast as he can to get home, suddenly shamed by the realization that though Marilyn had left them all those years ago, she had still returned and stayed with them. When he gets in the door, he lies down on the carpet with a melancholy Hannah who forces him to look up at the ceiling and see the



inexplicable white footprint on the ceiling. He invites Hannah to crawl on his back as he plays a game with her that he used to play with Lydia. In the game, James would pretend that Lydia was missing and would find her again. Hannah enjoys the game and asks him to do it again, which he obliges. Marilyn comes downstairs and finds James. She sends Hannah upstairs to bed, and the two of them talk. The two of them exchange only the briefest of words and then consummate their renewed love and gratitude that each had taken the other back. That night, Marilyn wanders over to Lydia's room and considers the loss of her beloved daughter and what the future will be like without her.

The next day, Nath wakes up and sees Jack through his window. He puts his sneakers on, goes downstairs, and runs after him. Hannah sprints after her brother and tries to convince him that it was not Jack's fault. Nath angrily confronts Jack. Jack expresses how sorry he is for everything that has happened to Nath. Nath demands to know the truth about what happened that day and what made Lydia go out on the lake. Jack, confused, gradually realizes that Lydia had never told Nath the truth that had emerged that last day, that Jack was in love with Nath. He says that he should have admitted a long time ago, and Nath provokes him into saying that it was all his fault. Nath punches Jack, but Jack does not hit back. Hannah rushes forward and tries to break up the fight, but in so doing she accidentally knocks Nath into the lake. Nath meditates on how this must have been what it was like for Lydia and briefly considers not trying to swim, but Hannah's face anchors him, and he swims towards the shore.

Analysis

At the start of Chapter 11, Nath tries to reconcile with Lydia by asking her to choose between two shirts he purchased for the social mixer for newly admitted students during Harvard's overnight. Nath is bubbling over with excitement about going to school and about leaving home. Nath seems so preoccupied with his own success and bright future that he cannot see that Lydia is clearly sad and withdrawn. Both siblings are preoccupied with Nath's leaving. Lydia obsesses over losing her brother and is sensitive to any thought about how he is leaving. "Already she missed him" the narrator says even though Nath is standing right in front of Lydia modeling his new shirt. Later that night, Lydia tries to tell Nath about her suspicions about an affair between Louisa and her father, but she cannot form the words when she finds him looking out the window of his room. The intimacy between the two siblings is gone, and Lydia cannot voice what she really wants to tell him and so she ponders how to say out loud, "I saw. I think. I need." Nath is distracted with looking at the stars, and Lydia agrees with him that they are amazing. This calls to mind the distance between Lydia and Nath; to Lydia, Nath is already light years away from her.

The next morning, Lydia makes Nath promise to call her to check in while he is away. Nath, distracted and not really paying attention, promises he will call her. Promises are not taken lightly by Lydia. From the promise to herself that she will do whatever she wants to the promise that she would behave while her mother was gone, Lydia's life is full of promises from a young age. She considers them a binding agreement, and she will later force Hannah to promise she will never smile when she does not want to. Nath,



however, carelessly agrees and is not sincere. Lydia breaks down a few days later and calls Nath, who is tipsy from drinking at a party. She says that she has something she needs to tell him, but when she cannot vocalize her suspicions about her father's affair Nath seizes on her weakness and mocks her, trivializing her problems at home and minimizing her feelings. Saying that "I don't have time for this," Nath says in a scathing tone that Lydia should take her problems to Jack. At this point, relations between Nath and Lydia have unraveled. Nath implies that he not only wants to get out of his house, he also wants to get out of Lydia's shadow and start a new life of his own.

Obedient as ever, Lydia follows her brother's advice. She trusts Jack, who has been a good listener, so the next day she puts on makeup and a nice dress and, after school, makes a move on Jack to initiate a sexual encounter. However, when Jack communicates his repressed love for Nath, Lydia feels embarrassed, rejected, and pathetic. Her only defense is to threaten to tell other people that Jack is in love with a boy, but something about Jack's remarks that at least he does not let other people tell him what to do and at least he is not afraid lingers in Lydia's mind. In fact, the words haunt her and drive her to evaluate her life.

Bewildered by the stunning revelation of Jack's love for Nath, Lydia's world has turned upside down. She thinks about the moment when everything went wrong and realizes it lies in the summer her mother disappeared and returned, the summer Nath pushed her in the lake and then saved her life. In the early morning hours, Lydia looks down at the water from the dock and realizes that Jack was right; ever since the summer her mother left she has been afraid of losing her father, mother, and, most of all, Nath. As a result, she has sacrificed her happiness. Lydia suddenly understands that what she wants is to swim from the middle of the lake to the dock, and so she swims out to the center of the lake and makes promises to herself and her family. She jumps out of the boat, convinced she will be able to swim to the dock.

This final passage of the chapter reveals Lydia's ambiguous intentions. At first it seems that she indeed wanted to commit suicide, but a closer reading shows Lydia does not seem like she intends to die. She sincerely believes she will be able to do it, that she will be able to swim to the dock. And yet she knows that she cannot swim, that without Nath there to hold on to her and tell her to kick, she cannot stay afloat. It is certain death. The question remains long after the book ends of whether or not Lydia wanted to die after all. The reader must assess the narrator's language as it describes Lydia's promises to herself and whether she felt she could prove to herself her own strength or whether she admitted defeat.

Chapter 12 opens with James speeding home to reconcile with Marilyn. He realizes that though Marilyn left them, she came back and stayed with them. Marilyn has always been committed to raising her family ever since that summer, and she has never wavered from her position supporting her husband. He encounters Hannah in the living room and stretches out on the floor beside her. She points out the strange footprint on the ceiling, the one that Lydia and Nath made and covered up so long ago. James attempts to relate to his daughter and forge a relationship with her the only way he knows how: by bringing up a childhood game he used to play with Lydia in which he



pretended to lose and find her. Hannah, overjoyed at the attention, demands another turn.

The author leaves readers with hope that James and Marilyn will begin to notice their youngest daughter who will soon be the only child in their home. Marilyn awakens and sends Hannah upstairs so she and James can talk. James and Marilyn's only words to each other show how they were certain that the other had "gone" and yet they are back together again. The narrator explains that in the coming years the family will learn to vocalize their feelings to each other. They will begin to communicate more instead of withdrawing information in the way that endangered each other and ultimately destroyed the harmony in their household. After they make love, Marilyn wanders to Lydia's room late at night and imagines she sees her daughter there sleeping. Marilyn accepts that Lydia will always be a mystery to her, one that she cannot solve.

Chapter 12 ends with a violent confrontation between Jack and Nath. Nath spots Jack heading to the lake and tears after him with Hannah hot on his heels. Nath expresses his enduring suspicions about Jack and demands to know the truth about why his sister drowned in the lake. Jack is confused because he believes Lydia told him about his secret love for Nath, but he realizes that she kept his secret. Jack realizes the best thing he can do is accept blame for her death, though he understands that he will never be able to love Nath openly and honestly. Nath reacts by punching Jack. Hannah, aware of Jack's secret, tries to break it up but accidentally pushes Nath in the water. Nath considers how Lydia must have felt, and he himself entertains the idea of giving up as well, but Hannah's face sobers him up and he swims to shore.

By making Hannah's face an anchor for Nath to seize, Ng shows how the youngest daughter will potentially also be the center of attention as Lydia once was. Ng leaves open the possibility that Hannah is the future focal point and the glue that holds the family together. Yet the novel ends on a high note by suggesting that the family will be able to reconcile their differences. They will be able to voice everything they never told each other.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the conversation with Nath while he is on his overnight trip to Harvard upset Lydia so much?

Discussion Question 2

Does Lydia truly believe that she will be able to survive falling from the boat into the water and is that why she decides to go through with it?



Discussion Question 3

In light of Lydia's death, do you think the changes to the Lee family's dynamics leave the reader with hope that the Lees can live more honestly and peacefully?

Vocabulary

savor, flank, preoccupied, incandescent, churn, granule, teeter, ratchet, trivial, brittle, attribute, volubility, enthrall, quaver, smug, nestle, poised, squander



Characters

Lydia Lee

Everything I Never Told You's first sentence, indeed first word, describes 16-year-old Lydia Lee, one of the main characters of the novel. At the opening of the novel, Lydia has disappeared from her home in suburban Ohio the night before, a fact the family realizes when she is not at the breakfast table. As her family soon learns, Lydia died by drowning in a lake nearby their house. After the death is quietly ruled a suicide by the police, the Lees must try to piece together what would have made Lydia do such a thing. The central mystery of "Who was Lydia?" propels the narrative forward as Ng's novel looks at the intricate and complicated relationships of the Lee family.

The middle child and oldest daughter of Marilyn and James Lee, Lydia is also the product of her parents' heritage. Her father, James, is the son of Chinese immigrants. Her mother, Marilyn, is the blonde haired, blue eyed daughter of American parents. Lydia inherits her father's jet black hair and her mother's blue eyes, an appearance that speaks to her negotiation between two backgrounds without ever finding a place where she fits in and is accepted. A formative event in Lydia's life was when her mother disappeared when she was 6 years old. In her mother's absence, Lydia made a desperate promise to herself that she would do whatever her mother wanted her to do if only she would come home again. When Marilyn returns to the house, Lydia finds that she has to keep the promise that comes to haunt her. For at the same time her mother comes home, Lydia also tells Marilyn that she lost her cookbook. Marilyn takes this as an opening to completely control Lydia's life and steer her towards a career in medicine and science. Lydia never refuses the enormous pressure that her mother places on her to the detriment of her own happiness and wellbeing. To her mother and to most outsiders, Lydia is a complacent, obedient, normal teenage girl. The reality is much different.

Although Lydia once told Marilyn that she has no secrets, the reader and the Lee family quickly learns that this is not the case. In the final months of her life, Lydia begins to struggle with academics and is failing physics, a fact that she hides from her mother as long as possible. Moreover, she fails her driver's test, less an indicator of aptitude and more a symbolic act. Angry that her father forces her to socialize with her peers who have always treated her as an outsider, Lydia puts up a pretense that she has many girlfriends when in actuality she has nobody she is close to but her neighbor Jack Wolff.

In Jack's car after school, Lydia tries to make herself out to be someone she is not, or rather someone who other people do not recognize her to be. Lydia, wounded by her brother's negligence to call her while he is away on an overnight visit to Harvard, kisses Jack on her final afternoon alive. His rejection confirms for Lydia that she has failed, in her eyes, at being accepted as a young woman whom another man would want. The tragic trajectory of Lydia's life from childhood to adolescence demonstrates Lydia's ultimate failure to have agency over her life in all but her final act of taking her own life.



Marilyn Lee

Blonde haired and blue eyed, Marilyn Lee is the Southern belle matriarch of the Lee family and a woman wounded by her past failure to realize her dream. Central to Marilyn's character is her struggle to define herself in her own terms and not in relation to other people. Early on in her life she rejects the homemaker career her mother endorses and studies physics and science to pursue a career in medicine.

At Harvard's Radcliffe College Marilyn finds herself the sole woman in rooms filled with men and sexist male professors who belittle her intelligence and aptitude. Undeterred, Marilyn continues her studies until she engages in a relationship with the young professor in an elective class on the American cowboy, James Lee. Marilyn embraces James, whom she truly loves, in spite of - and perhaps for - his different looks and background, relishing when her mother mistakenly assumes he is from a Southern family. Marilyn quickly becomes pregnant with Nath, and she leaves her studies at Harvard to marry James and have the child. At the time, Marilyn believes that she will resume her studies.

Eight years later, she has not resumed her studies, and in the wake of her mother's death Marilyn realizes she still wants to become a doctor with or without a family. Her mother's death seems to free Marilyn from ending up like her mother, a woman whom Marilyn thinks nobody will remember except what she cooked for them. In defiance, Marilyn refuses to prepare food for her family and instead relies on takeout and frozen meals, though she does keep her mother's Betty Crocker cookbook.

Marilyn's flight from James, Nath, and Lydia could be seen as a midlife crisis, yet she still returns home after she learns she is pregnant with Hannah because she is at heart dutiful and honest. In so doing Marilyn realizes she is trapped by domesticity and will never realize her dream. Instead she channels it to Lydia. She has accepted that she will never realize her goal to become a doctor, so when Lydia dies Marilyn understands that a part of her quest has died with Lydia, whom she attempted to mold in her image.

Marilyn's fear that she is seen as a "hysterical housewife" haunts her. When she discovers James' affair with Louisa, Marilyn decides she will go to retrieve her husband just like he retrieved her from the apartment in Toledo. Marilyn is furious with James and embarrassed at how he has made a fool out of her. An argument between them brings up a central disharmony in their relationship.

Marilyn seems blind to the fact that their family is different. Apart from using the word "kowitz" nothing indicates any acknowledgment on her part that her family does not fit in and is not accepted by her peers in their suburban Ohio town. Thus, it is from a standpoint of disbelief that she does not agree with James that if Lydia were white her death would never have happened. Until then, Marilyn does not realize that James feels like an outsider in a negative way, whereas for Marilyn James' difference was attractive to her since she would stand out from others, especially from her white Southern background. As the novel comes to a close, the reader sees Marilyn's growing acceptance that her husband feels this way and her acceptance that Lydia's death was



a suicide. As she embraces Hannah, she indicates she will now focus on her family's future.

James Lee

James Lee is the son of Chinese immigrants, a background that causes him much shame and anguish his entire life. James grew up going to a boarding school for wealthy children in Iowa and was able to attend because his father and mother worked for the school. Even from a young age James did not fit in with his peers despite his taking part in activities like swim team. James was often ridiculed by his peers and called derogatory names for the Chinese. He hoped to escape this fate when he attended Harvard as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student, but until he met Marilyn he never quite felt like he was accepted by America, despite his studying the most American subject he could: the history of the cowboy. When Marilyn says half-jokingly to James at their wedding that her mother was upset because she wishes Marilyn would marry someone more like her, she does not realize how deeply this will wound her husband.

Indeed, these words haunt James for years, and he repeats them to Marilyn during an argument they have after Lydia's death. Lydia's suicide seems to dislodge something in James so that his prior insecurities are even more exaggerated. James finds himself returning again and again to a newspaper article he saved in which Lydia is singled out as one of two Asian students in her high school. It seems to wound James personally when he discovers that Lydia was not in fact close to any of the friends she had mentioned over the years. Throughout Lydia's life James had continually emphasized popularity and fitting in, encouraging her to go out with friends and attend school dances. When he discovers that Lydia was virtually friendless he seems to take it as a personal failure. Just as Marilyn tried to live vicariously through Lydia and her hopes to become a doctor, James wanted her to accomplish something he never did: become popular with his peers. Through his actions, thoughts, and emotions it is clear that James blames himself for Lydia's suicide.

Through his affair with his teaching assistant Louisa Chen, James seeks refuge with a woman who shares his Chinese heritage. He says out loud that he should have married someone like her, and it is in Louisa's presence that James speaks his first words of Chinese in forty years. Louisa offers James a chance to never have to apologize for who he is or feel that he is tainting a relationship.

Yet, ultimately, James returns to Marilyn and reconciles with her with a passion that leads to lovemaking. The narrator notes by the end of the book that James never sees Louisa again. It seems that Lydia's death, though tragic, has presented James with an opportunity to communicate more freely with Marilyn, who appears to be increasingly interested in having an open dialogue with her husband.

Lydia's death, then, opens the door for her family to tell each other everything they never felt comfortable sharing.



Nathan "Nath" Lee

The first child of Marilyn and James, Nathan "Nath" Lee falls into the sustained dynamics of his family where Lydia is the focal point of her parents' attention while Nath and Hannah receive little to none of it. Despite the fact that Nath's birth represented the end of Marilyn's studies at Harvard and the opening of a new chapter in her life as a housewife and mom, Marilyn never outwardly blames Nath or treats him poorly. Indeed, except for the conversation in which Nath reveals his suspicions about his father's affair, Nath and Marilyn barely say anything to each other in the course of the book. Instead, in the presence of Lydia and the pressures and hopes piled on her, Nath takes a back seat until his acceptance at Harvard when he seems to finally receive some acclaim and recognition from his parents. When Lydia sabotages his celebration by proclaiming that she is failing physics, Nath expresses his growing resentment of Lydia's place in the family as the chosen child by ignoring her and ultimately mocking her while he attends a party at an overnight trip to Harvard. With his purchase of a new and colorful shirt, Nath signifies his readiness to step out and assume agency of his identity.

Central to Nath's character is a lingering anger towards Jack Wolff, whom Nath originally blames for Lydia's death. Nath's hostility towards Jack stems from the incident in the pool when he was a young child. When his peers shouted ethnic slurs at Nath while he had his eyes closed during a game of Marco Polo, it was Jack who rescued him by allowing Nath to end his turn. Nath seems to blame Jack for bailing him out, seeing Jack as someone who pointed out his awkwardness and brought attention to his painful failure to join the group. This sparks a lifelong hatred on Nath's end, though the reader comes to see how Jack is infatuated with Nath in a romantic way. Jack also offended Nath when he tried to comfort him in the wake of Marilyn's disappearance. That Jack spent time with Lydia in her final months deeply unsettles Nath. It is as if Jack represents a side of Lydia Jack does not want to acknowledge, a side of her that is independent and even daring. By becoming friends with Jack, Lydia distances herself from her brother and from her family's image of her as a flawless young woman.

Nath's relationship with his sisters is complicated. Lydia and Nath bonded early on in Marilyn's absence. While Marilyn was living in Toledo, Nath also became obsessed with astronomy, an interest that caused the ire of his father during a tense moment and also a passion that persists into his ambitions to study the science at Harvard. Nath and Lydia also bonded during Marilyn's abandonment by spending the days watching television and tip-toeing around their distraught father. When Marilyn returns, Nath sees how she fixates on Lydia. In the days and weeks after Marilyn returns, Lydia becomes the center of their attention. This causes a jealousy in Nath, so much so that he pushes Lydia in the water at the lake even though he knows she cannot swim. He ends up guiding her to shore, and the two of them are forever connected through this act of frustration. The event is echoed in the final scene of the novel when Hannah inadvertently pushes Nath in the water and he has to decide whether or not to try to survive. It is Hannah's image that gives him purpose and motivates him to keep his head above water. At the close of the novel readers have hope that Nath and Hannah will have a relationship where they feel comfortable expressing their emotions to each



other. Lydia's death, then, will spark a more open relationship between Nath and Hannah.

Hannah Lee

As much as Lydia is a mystery to her family, youngest child Hannah matches her in terms of reticence and secrecy. Hannah was conceived presumably when Marilyn and James made love just before Marilyn abandoned the family to move to Toledo. As she grows up, Hannah seems to understand her role as an afterthought, as the child who is packed away in her room in the attic and, as the narrator says of Hannah's parents, "...now and then each of them would forget, fleetingly, that she existed." Hannah is bright enough to understand that this is her place in the family. According to the narrator, "Hannah, as if she understood her place in the cosmos, grew from quiet infant to watchful child...staying out of sight as well as mind, to ensure the terrain of the family did not change." Thus Hannah realizes that it is essential for her to be unassuming and withdrawn, never demanding too much attention for fear of upsetting the carefully constructed family dynamics. A final conversation with her mother in which they embrace leaves open the possibility that they can be closer and that finally her mother can start seeing her as the future of the family and not a reminder of the interruption to her dreams to become a doctor.

The narrator's description of Hannah as a "watchful child" could be considered an understatement. In Chapter 1 the reader sees immediately that Hannah is more observant than the rest of her family; while she lies awake the night Lydia is discovered to be missing, Hannah considers how she heard the front door close in the early hours of the morning. She is convinced that this was Lydia, yet she does not tell anyone this. Indeed, the police do not even think to question her for information about Lydia's disappearance.

In an effort to understand her sister's death, Hannah sneaks out at night and retraces her sister's path to the lake. Just as Marilyn searches for the truth in Lydia's room, Hannah hopes to find it as she gazes into the water. Hannah is observant in other ways as well. For example, she suspects that Jack is in love with Nath because once they were spending time at the lake a drop of water ran down Nath's body and landed on Jack's hand. Jack brought his hand to his mouth and licked the drop of water. Hannah was the sole witness to this act, and though she withholds this information from everyone else, she still does not want to see Jack come to harm. In the final scene of the novel, when Hannah pushes Nath into the lake, it seems she is trying to communicate with her brother in the only way she knows how. Her family does not trust her word to be worth anything, so she tries to send an unmistakable message loud and clear. Hannah is taking steps to break her silence and convey everything she has never spoken.

Central to understanding Hannah's character is her tendency to steal objects from her family members. By collecting little trinkets from the members of her family, Hannah is trying to feel like she is closer to them. If she can collect some of the most mundane



objects they own, she has a more intimate connection to them. This gets her into trouble when she steals and wears Lydia's locket. Enraged at her sister, Lydia seizes it from Hannah and tells her never to wear it and never to smile when she does not want to. Lydia means well, for she is trying to shape Hannah into someone she could never be: someone who wears her emotions honestly and does not form into the mold that other people envision for her. After Lydia's death, Hannah will continue to study the locket as if it holds a key to her sister's death. At the end of the novel, though she is the most observant of the Lees, Hannah still has not figured her sister out completely.

Louisa Chen

Louisa Chen is James' teaching assistant. Louisa had surprised James when he first met her because he had been teaching at Middlewood College for 18 years and never had an Asian student. In fact, at first Louisa reminded him of Lydia appearance-wise. Right from the beginning of the novel their relationship betrays hints of tension between the two, a fact that James' colleague Stanley Hewitt notices. In Chapter 1 James plucks a ladybug from Louisa's hair, an action that belies an intimacy between them. This blooms into a full-blown affair following Lydia's death. Lydia's actions invite James to become involved with her, and he even comes to stay with her towards the end of the novel. However, by the end of the novel they have parted ways and will never speak to each other again. Louisa's function is to serve as a foil to Marilyn. When he is with Louisa James is able to play out his fantasy of what life would have been like had he married someone with his heritage. He even says to her that "You're the kind of girl I should have married." Louisa, then, acts as a blank slate for James to project his "What If?" musings about what life would have been like had he taken another path.

Jack Wolff

Jack Wolff is the controversial neighbor and peer of the Lee children. Jack's presence irritates Nath, who has had a grudge against him ever since he bailed him out during an awkward game of Marco Polo in the community pool when they were children.

Jack has a reputation for being a bit of a womanizer, and he carries an air of mystery about him. Jack is said to be with a new girl every few weeks. However, though she is at first intimidated by him, Lydia soon grows to be close to Jack. Jack gives Lydia his sole attention whenever they hang out in his car after school. From his actions and words it is clear that Jack is not using Lydia to get to Nath. He seems to genuinely like and respect her and provides her with a companionship that she fails to find elsewhere.

Surely for Lydia Jack represents danger, a taboo, and a way to challenge herself to socialize more. Although it does not seem like it is initially her goal to anger Nath, Lydia succeeds in doing so. Still, whenever Nath is not around Jack his presence remains. Jack constantly asks Hannah and Lydia about Nath, inquiring about his whereabouts and saying to Lydia half-jokingly that Nath would not like her hanging around with him. It is not until Lydia makes a move and tries to initiate a sexual encounter with Jack that



she learns what Hannah already knows: that Jack is gay and is in love with Nath. When Lydia leaves Jack's car after he reveals his feelings for Nath, it seems as if she will tell Nath. However, that night she kills herself and never gets a chance to do it.

Meanwhile, Hannah, who had observed a tender moment of pining from Jack to Nath, tries to protect his relationship with Nath from escalating into further conflict. During the final scene, Nath assumes the blame for pushing Lydia to suicide rather than reveal his feelings for Nath. When Nath lunges for Jack, Hannah pushes her brother into the water where he reflects on his life and decides to fight to swim and stay alive.

A character fully realized with feelings of his own, Jack fits into Ng's theme of repression. Though Nath never outright says that he is in love with Jack to Hannah or Lydia, his words and gestures imply as much. He buries his sexual frustration in an endless stream of girls to try to forget and deny how he feels, for he knows that he and Nath could never be together. Jack is bound by silence and has the own weight of his secrets dragging him down into meaningless encounters.

Doris Walker

Doris Walker is Marilyn's mother. A home economics teacher at Marilyn's high school and a single mother, Doris projects her dreams for Marilyn's future upon her daughter. Doris wants Marilyn to be a housewife and homemaker, and makes remarks about how going to Radcliffe is a smart choice because she will meet a Harvard man there. Marilyn, meanwhile, rebels against her mother's campaign and purposefully tries to fail her home economics class. At the same time, Marilyn retreats into the world of science and pursues her ambition to become a doctor despite her status of often being the sole female in the classroom.

Marilyn's marriage to James destroys her mother's hopes for her. Marilyn had not told her about James' ethnicity, so it comes as a total shock and offense to Doris when she arrives in Boston for their wedding only to find that her future son-in-law is "different." Doris tries to persuade Marilyn not to marry James but is unsuccessful, and mother and daughter never speak again.

When Doris dies, Marilyn is caught off guard by her emotions for her mother. Her mother's death leaves her to confront her unresolved feelings about leaving school to have Nath and marry James. Even though she is not a physical presence in front of her daughter, Doris' influence remains; Marilyn drives her car off the side of the road in a rain storm and sobs as she resolves never to end up like her mother, a woman whom people only remembered for what she cooked.

Although they were never close, Doris left a significant impression on her daughter by repelling her daughter away from her profession and values. However, Marilyn also inherited Doris' parenting style. Just as Doris poured her hopes into Marilyn that she would grow up to be like her, so too does Marilyn pressure Lydia into becoming a doctor



just like she wanted to be. Doris' reach was more lasting than Marilyn could have imagined, yet she fails to see this side of herself.

Janet Wolff

The single mother of Jack, Janet Wolff is influential in Marilyn's decision to abandon her family and pursue her dream to become a doctor by enrolling in college classes and moving to Toledo. When Marilyn encounters Janet in the emergency room of their local hospital, she sees a flash of her old ambition in Janet. Neighborhood gossip says that Jack has questionable morals and is slightly deviant because Janet leaves him alone without adult supervision while she is on call at the hospital. Yet when the reader meets her, Janet seems professional, calm, and confident. Jack seems stable as well and boasts to Nath about not having a father. Marilyn's encounter with Janet triggers something in her so that she rationalizes her decision to leave. Janet's role, then, is to spark action in Marilyn as she confronts the reality of her failure to become a doctor and the possibility that she can still do so, at any cost.

Stanley Hewitt

Stanley Hewitt is James' colleague at Middlewood College. Stanley comes across as being pompous, judgmental, and nosy and hints at the chemistry between Louisa and James. James feels uncomfortable around Stanley and later admits to himself that he suspects Stanley sees him as subservient and obedient. Stanley's main function in the novel is to show the reader that Louisa and James interacted in a way that could be considered intimate to others even at the beginning of the book.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Lake

When the Lees first move to Middlewood, the realtor charms them by highlighting the nearby lake. "And think of it, the lake practically at your doorstep," the realtor tells James. "You and the kiddos can swim all summer. Like having your own private beach." And, indeed, at first living in Middlewood presents the promise of a successful middle class American life for James and Marilyn.

Over the years, however, James and the children are subject to ridicule and resentment from members of the community. Marilyn, with her all-American good looks, is immune to the racist remarks that the rest of her family receives. As they grow up, the children do go swimming at the lake frequently. Ultimately, however, it is where Lydia's body is discovered and it is where her family comes to understand she committed suicide.

When Lydia decides to redirect her life, she pinpoints the moment where everything went wrong to be when her brother helped her swim ashore after he pushed her in the water deliberately. Lydia has never learned to swim, so she knows she faces certain death when she steps out of the boat and into the water though there is some hint from the narrator that perhaps she hoped she would not drown. Regardless, Lydia knows that drowning in the lake will represent to her family her ultimate failure. Having never learned the survival skill to know how to swim, Lydia leaves little room for speculation that she would have rowed out into the center of the lake and jumped out of the boat if she did not want to drown.

James and Marilyn never thought it was important enough to make Lydia take swimming lessons, especially after Nath was the object of racist taunting once when he went to the community pool. The reader sees how the harassment that James and Nath felt had repercussions for stopping Lydia from learning this important skill.

After Lydia's death, Nath stalks after Jack in the final pages of the novel. Angry at Jack and blaming him for Lydia's death, Nath punches Jack hard. Hannah intervenes and accidentally pushes Nath into the lake, where he meditates on how this must have felt for Lydia. At first Nath seems to offer no resistance to drowning and lets himself fully feel what Lydia felt. However, he sees Hannah's face and clings to the image as something to hold on to while he swims ashore. The lake, then, ultimately brings Nath and Hannah together. Throughout the final chapters of the novel the reader sees the family pay more attention to Hannah, but not in a hyper-focused way as it was with Lydia. Hannah is the future of this family, and the final picture with Nath anchoring his survival in her image plants the hope for a family reconciliation in Hannah. In the end, though the lake took Lydia's life, it gave birth to a new beginning with the youngest child.



The Locket

When James first gives Lydia a locket necklace on the eve of her 16th birthday, Lydia is delighted to have received a gift she wanted, not something her parents wanted for her like a book. James tells Lydia that he wants the locket to remind her of things that are more important than school, such as friendship and love, which will hopefully be sparked by the pictures inside of her and her father. He makes her promise to smile every time she looks at the locket. Lydia is displeased that James focuses on silver, which "a reliable source" told him is fashionable this year.

The next day, Louisa catches a ride to the dentist with Lydia and James as they go to the driver's center so Lydia can take her permit test. Louisa tells Lydia that she helped pick out the locket, and this prompts Lydia to pick up on the sexual tension between Louisa and her father. Later that night, after failing the test, she attempts to rip off the necklace, now a reminder of her father's possible infidelity, but cannot break the chain.

Soon after, Louisa finds Hannah wearing the necklace and succeeds in tearing it off her neck, telling her to never smile when she does not want to. Hannah is puzzled by this conversation and thinks about what Lydia meant for a long time after her death, including when she sneaks into Lydia's room to look at the necklace where it has been buried behind her bed. The locket held so much promise at first for Lydia. What could have been a gift he genuinely wanted her to have for her own pleasure--to have something beautiful and to feel beautiful wearing it--was quickly replaced by disappointment when his words belied his motives for picking out something that would be trendy so she could be popular. Finding out that Louisa helped James pick out the necklace disgusts Lydia, and she feels her father's actions were insincere and artificial. Lydia feels violated by the intrusion of Louisa into their lives and intentionally tries to hurt her when she tells Louisa that James never mentions her.

When Lydia succeeds in tearing the locket off Hannah's neck, she tries to leave her with the formative advice that she should never smile when she does not want to, meaning she should never have to be something she is not. To Lydia, the locket represents still answering "yes" to whatever her parents want, such as smiling when she sees the necklace so she keeps her promise to James. Lydia feels that someone should never be pressured into appearing happy and recognizes that that is the irreversible course her life has taken unless she takes significant action to change her life.

The Cookbook

Marilyn is first reacquainted with her mother's Betty Crocker cookbook when she goes to her mother's home after she dies to settle her affairs. Marilyn flips through the pages of the book and feels like she understands her mother better from observing what her mother had highlighted, not recipes but the advice sprinkled throughout the text. These passages which her mother felt the need to memorize reinforce Marilyn's picture of her mother as someone who "...the only thing worth remembering about her, in the end, was that she had cooked." The cookbook, then, represents a living tribute to her mother and



the life that she had wanted for her daughter, a homemaker life that Marilyn realizes she is already living.

Marilyn brings the cookbook home to Ohio as her only memento with which to remember her mother by. Marilyn stubbornly refuses to cook, however, and the cookbook serves as a reminder of what she does not want to become. Rather, she moves to Toledo to take college classes so she can apply to medical school. Before she leaves, she reads the cookbook morning and night. When she leaves the cookbook behind Lydia stumbles upon it and starts to "...[leaf] through it with the adoration of a devotee touching a Bible" as if it could bring her mother back or as if she could at the very least be closer to her mother.

When Marilyn returns, Lydia tells her mother that she lost the cookbook and is surprised when her mother is not angry about it. Instead, Marilyn takes this as a symbolic rejection of her mother and her's fate and begins to mold Lydia's future so she can be a doctor. However, in the final pages of the novel, Marilyn discovers the cookbook in Lydia's room. She is not angry with her daughter but touched that her daughter hid the book so she never would have had to find it again. What Marilyn never grasps is that a cookbook represents a kind of scientific process not unlike a lab experiment. She did in fact inherit a love for the scientific process from her mother but in a different way. Instead of encouraging Lydia to become her own woman and pursue her own interests, including culinary arts, Marilyn had denied her that option by championing a science she felt was superior. Ultimately, Marilyn is a lot closer to her mother than she would like to believe.

Lydia's Diaries

The Christmas before Marilyn left the family she gave five-year-old Lydia a diary. When Lydia was puzzled by what she was supposed to do with it, Marilyn told her it was for keeping her secrets. Lydia replied that she had no secrets. After Lydia goes missing, Marilyn opens the diaries and discovers they are all blank; she is confronted with the revelation that either Lydia did not have any secrets, or in fact she kept them hidden elsewhere where her mother can never reach them. In this way, the diaries present a puzzle.

On the one hand, Lydia felt that she had nothing to keep from other people and did not write anything down. Yet there were parts of her life that she did not share with her family, such as her slipping grades in physics or her suspicions about her father having an affair. For whatever reason, Lydia did not feel comfortable putting her feelings down on paper, either because she did not value her own emotions or she did not feel like they could be kept safe from prying eyes, and she kept them buried inside instead. With the sole exception of Jack, Lydia does not share her feelings with anyone, leading to a crushing isolation that drives her to suicide.



The Footprint on the Ceiling

On Lydia's last Christmas morning, her relationship with Nath is still frosty in the wake of her stealing attention away from his acceptance to Harvard by telling everyone she is failing physics. Lydia catches an apologetic smile from Nath from across the living room and almost smiles back, but something on the ceiling catches her eye and changes her mind. It is the barely-visible, off-white mark of a half footprint and a faint discolored smudge.

When Lydia and Nath were young, Marilyn had left them alone while she took Hannah to the doctor. Lydia and Nath were afraid of a spider on the ceiling of the living room, so Nath used his father's shoe to squash it. Seeing the mark the shoe and spider left on the ceiling, Nath tried to get Lydia to accept the blame, but she came up with the better idea to paint over it with white out. When she spots the mark on the ceiling now, Lydia is reminded of how she and her brother used to be a team. The two of them had their own inside jokes and private world where they bonded over living in a tense household. Remembering their past relationship where they stuck together rubs salts in her wounds and reminds her again of how they will soon be split up when Nath goes to college.

The footprint is later brought up in the final chapter when Hannah points it out to James as they recline on the floor of the living room. Both find the footprint inexplicable, but the two of them bond over the strange image. This recalls the mark Marilyn's foot left on James' apartment wall when they were love and she accidentally smudged paint with her foot while they were making love. For Nath and Lydia the footprint was part of their secret language of being siblings. The footprint, then, is a legacy that symbolizes a tender moment in the past that paves the way for a new bond to emerge between James and Hannah over the absurdity of the mark.

The Acceptance Letter from Harvard

Nath's acceptance letter to Harvard was seized by Lydia and stowed away in her room. It is not until Jack brings over a misdelivered second letter that Nath realizes he has been admitted. Later, Lydia will attempt to steal a letter regarding an overnight visit. To Lydia the acceptance letter reminds her of her own failure in school as her grades are beginning to slip.

Although it is acknowledged by both siblings that Lydia is the central focus of their parents' attention, Lydia still feels that Nath has assumed her position as the focal point for the family's expectations.

Moreover, when Lydia steals the letter she indicates that some part of her does not want her brother to leave. As Nath angrily chides her when he catches her in the act of reading some housing forms that had come for him, "...What the hell were you thinking? That if I didn't get this, I couldn't go?" Lydia does not realize how irrational her behavior is, yet it demonstrates how close she is with her brother and how she cannot bear it if her brother were to abandon her just like their mother did before.



The Chinese Buns

After James has begun his affair with Louisa, she serves him Chinese pork buns in her apartment. Seeing and smelling them stirs up memories for James of his own mother's pork buns, and he speaks his first words of Chinese out loud in 40 years. The buns represent a confrontation with his heritage. Louisa shows James a side of life he could have had, a wife who shared his cultural background and ethnicity. This is initially attractive to James, but it does not hold his attention once he realizes Marilyn wants him to come home. The buns make him recall his childhood and slip into Chinese, yet ultimately James rejects this background and returns instead to his mixed-racial family where he realizes he really does belong.

The 4th of July

Independence Day, or the 4th of July as it is referred to in the novel, makes two significant appearances in *Everything I Never Told You*. First, Marilyn's escape to Toledo ends on July 3rd when she discovers that she is pregnant. James drives up from Middlewood to retrieve her on the 4th of July, and she returns home that day. Second, in the present day, the 4th of July is a little over two months since Lydia had died. On this 4th of July James has gone missing. Retreating to Louisa's apartment, James avoids his family and has had no contact with them. After hearing from her children that her husband is potentially having an affair, Marilyn tracks him down at Louisa's. James does come home and the two reconcile.

Within the novel, the 4th of July reinforces the theme of assimilation. The 4th of July is perhaps the most American of holidays, for it celebrates the country's independence from Britain. Ng purposefully uses the holiday to represent independence for America as well as independence for Marilyn and James. Though their respective abandonments and homecomings are separated by years, similarities exist. Marilyn wanted an independent life free of a family so she could pursue her goal to become a doctor. Yet ultimately she failed and had to reconcile the fact that she cannot be independent, that she cannot have an identity outside of family life. This mirrors James' abandonment and return as he sought independence from the crushing stress at home in the wake of Lydia's death. Yet James, too, cannot abandon his family. He returns, and his independence is broken as he and Marilyn bond over their sorrow and decide to move on together.

The Drop of Water

Hannah has known for a while that Jack had a certain fascination with Nath, one that she guesses correctly is love and longing. This idea first blooms in her mind one summer when the Lee children are at the lake and are sitting with Jack. A drop of water drips down Nath's body and lands on Jack's hand. Jack, thinking nobody is looking, lifts his hand up to his mouth "as if it were honey" and touches it with his tongue. This tender gesture, observed by Hannah alone, shows that Jack finds Nath so appealing that he



considers anything that touches Nath to be sacred. The action is also suggestive and has a sexual connotation; it is as if Jack is drinking up Nath's essence. Hannah's witnessing this event lodges something in her that makes her feel protective of Jack.

Lydia's Physics Exam

Lydia's physics exam is the latest in a series of slipping grades in her mother's favorite subject. Lydia had been placed into advanced science courses but had kept it from her mother that she was in over her head. Lydia had promised herself that she would do whatever her mother wanted as long as she would not leave them again. Years later, at age 16, Lydia still feels compelled to stick to this personal promise, and the shame and sense of personal failure she feels at failing physics crushes her. Lydia had hid the test for weeks, avoiding asking her mother to sign it like her teacher requested, until she took it home over winter break with no other options but to get her mother's signature.

For Lydia, the physics exam represents a physical manifestation of her inability to measure up and be the person her mother wants her to be. Moreover, revealing her score would show her mother that she is not the person other people believe her to be. Ultimately, Lydia uses the exam as an excuse to break up Nath's celebration at having gotten accepted at Harvard. As much as she cannot stand the pressure that her family places on her, she also cannot handle not being the center of attention.



Settings

The Lee Residence

The Lees live in a small town in northwestern Ohio near the college where James teaches. Much of the action of the novel takes place in the Lee residence, including significant conversations between the siblings, parents and children, and James and Marilyn. The Lees are the only family with Chinese heritage in the neighborhood. Neither the parents nor the children have company over throughout the course of the story or in flashbacks. Indeed the house seems to give them an opportunity for isolation.

After Lydia's death Marilyn very rarely appears outside the house or even outside Lydia's room. She defines herself in relation to the house and domesticity when she refuses to cook for her family and later identifies herself as a "hysterical housewife." James has his office and later Louisa's apartment as a retreat, and Hannah, Lydia, and Nath all have places they can go like the lake or school to get outside of the house, but other than her escape to Toledo and a few other detours, Marilyn is only ever shown in the house.

The Lake

When James and Marilyn first buy their house, the lake is made to be a selling point by the realtor, a place that could be their "own private beach." We first hear of the lake when someone notices that the rowboat has been taken out to the middle of the lake. The lake is then dragged, and Lydia's body is found.

The readers come to see over the years that the lake was a gathering place for the children. It is where Hannah observes Jack's tender behavior towards Nath; where Hannah and Nate go a few times after Lydia dies; and, perhaps most importantly, where Lydia almost died when Nath pushed her into the lake the summer their mother disappeared. Lydia returns to the lake to drown herself because she mentally places where things went wrong in her life to that moment when Nath saved her from drowning after he pushed her in. She decides to finish what she thinks should have happened all along, that she should have drowned. In the wake of her death, Hannah will go to the lake at night and try to find answers for why her sister killed herself.

The final scene takes place in the water when Hannah accidentally pushes Nath in the water, and he reflects on what it must have been like for Lydia to give up and drown. Ultimately, however, buoyed by Hannah's face, he decides to swim to shore.

Louisa Chen's Apartment

Louisa Chen, James' teaching assistant, invites James to her apartment initially as an invitation to cook him something to eat. However, James and Louisa use her apartment



as a place to carry out their affair. James finds Louisa's apartment to be a safe haven for him away from the emotionally volatile Lee residence, where in the weeks after Lydia's death Marilyn and James barely say a word to one another. James tells Louisa that he should have married someone like her, meaning someone who also has Chinese heritage. Indeed, Louisa's apartment is the site where James speaks his first words of Chinese in 40 years when he calls the pork buns she offers him by their Chinese name. In the final chapters of the novel, Marilyn tracks James down at Louisa's apartment and though she does not see him loudly makes it clear that she expects him to come home. By the end of the novel, James and Louisa will never talk again.

The Pool

When Nath is a young boy, James takes him to the community pool one summer while Marilyn has gone to tend to her mother's affairs. James had been a swimmer when he was in high school, though he never won any trophies, and he thinks it will present Nath with an opportunity to excel at the sport and be a team leader. While they are at the pool, James encourages Nath to enter the pool and play with the other kids his age. Nath does but is the victim of the other children's ridicule. James is ashamed of and for Nath and sees his rejection as a personal failure reflective of his own inability to fit in. This incident also prompts Jack to come to Nath's rescue, an act that Nath will forever hold against Jack.

The reader sees that even at such a young age Nath is teased and seen as an outsider. The pool therefore acts as a microcosm of the community at large and a crystal ball into which the reader can see the course of Nath's social life. When he enters the water the children act as if he has stained or tarnished a sterile and clean environment, as if he has invaded their space with his otherness.

Jack's Car

In the final months of her life, Lydia begins to spend more time in Jack's car after school. Jack attempts to teach her how to drive, but she is too impatient and can never relax as she tries to drive the car. Jack's car is an environment where Lydia can go to feel more like the person she thinks she is rather than the person other people tell her she is.

Jack, her classmate in physics and longtime neighbor, represents a kind of danger to her narrative thus far. Jack is seen as a womanizer, and he is someone who Nath outwardly does not like. On her final day she is alive Lydia tries unsuccessfully to instigate a sexual encounter with Jack in the car. In this way the car comes to represent Lydia's failure to truly be taken seriously as a woman with her own desires. Moreover, the car signifies Lydia's inability to learn how to drive, an ability that would allow her to drive away and leave home just as Nath will soon do so.



Themes and Motifs

Swimming

One of the main themes of *Everything I Never Told You* is Swimming. We first encounter the theme at the end of Chapter 1 when the narrator tells readers that Lydia had refused to take swimming lessons at the local community pool. When someone notices that a boat has been drifting in the center of the lake, the police decide to drag the lake and find Lydia's body in the bottom. Then, further into the story the reader witnesses the painfully awkward game of Marco Polo that Nath experiences when he is a boy the summer that his mother abandoned him. James notes that he had been on the swim team in high school, and during the scene at the pool he notes his private hopes that Nath will excel in Swimming and be on the team as well. James hopes he will make friends this way. Yet Nath fails to blend in with the other kids, who call him a "chink," until Jack saves him by ending his turn at the game. For James, then, Swimming is a metaphor for succeeding socially and especially for assimilating into mainstream culture. If Nath knows how to swim, he will not only be self-sufficient but he will be able to fit in.

For the Lee children, Swimming is a metaphor for survival, both literal--not drowning--and figurative, assimilating. Despite the fact that he detests Swimming in the pool, Nath still frequents the lake with his sisters. In fact, that same summer as the incident with Marco Polo he and Lydia go to the lake shortly after their mother returns home. Knowing that Lydia cannot swim, Nath pushes Lydia into the water. This is an act of frustration and is born out of jealousy that the tides are starting to turn in their house. After Marilyn returns home, the family's focus shifts to Lydia, and all the attention gets poured on her. Though he is oldest, Nath fades into the background. This shift is enough to dislodge something in him, and he takes out his frustration with his sister in this act of aggression. However, it is immediately clear that he does not want his sister to drown. He jumps in after her and tells her how to make it to shore, by kicking. The two collapse on the beach and realize they will never speak of this again. In that act, Swimming works to symbolize Lydia's inability to survive without her brother. He ultimately is the one who saved her, a fact that is not lost on Lydia.

In fact, it is years later when Lydia feels a deep sense of helplessness and despair, that she attempts to trace back her history until she discovers "...where everything had gone wrong." Lydia sneaks out of the house and goes down to the lake, ruminating on how she should have died when Nath pushed her into the water. Lydia gets in the boat and rows out to the middle of the lake where she jumps in the water to drown. For Lydia, Swimming demonstrates failure and acceptance. It is failure for it shows how she cannot depend on herself to survive. Without her brother, she would be dead years ago, and now, without anyone to help her, she will die now. Lydia also uses Swimming to display her acceptance of her own helplessness and failure. On the dock she makes promises to herself and her family. No longer will she study physics, and from now on she will let Nath leave. Drowning herself is "...what she must do to seal her promises,



make them real." Thus Lydia sees Swimming and, alternately, drowning as a definitive way to end her life. Once her family realizes that she cannot swim, they will understand that she committed suicide. Lydia hopes that the power of her act will encourage them to move on, for she cannot see how they can exist if she is still there. Drowning by choice shows her family that she desires those last seconds where she cannot breathe until she gradually slips into unconsciousness.

In the final scene, Hannah mimics Nath's push without intending to. Nath and Jack are fighting on the dock, and Hannah pushes them in the water. While he floats in the water, Nath feels himself drift back and forth between the two options: to live or to die. Nath uses those moments when he is in the water to envision what it was like for Lydia in her final minutes alive. He tries to take in all that she would have seen and felt. But he cannot fully commit to what Lydia experienced because, as the narrator tells us, "It's too late. He's already learned not to drown." In this way, Swimming and drowning are two things that Nath and Lydia will never have in common. He cannot drown, and she cannot swim. Nath will never understand this part of Lydia, and he accepts that as he decides to swim ashore and take Jack's hand to help him out of the water. He clings to the image of Hannah's face as something to live for, something to focus on, and the reader is left with hope that they will have a closer relationship. Ultimately, for Nath, drowning is not an option. Despite the cruelty of his peers during the Marco Polo game, Nath still learned how to swim. He fought his way through high school and, from how he sounded on the phone with Lydia during the party at Harvard, he will be given new opportunities to meet and mingle with his peers. The reader is left with confidence that Nath will be able to have better experiences in college.

Ethnicity/Identity and Assimilation

The dueling themes of Ethnicity and Assimilation are prominent themes in *Everything I Never Told You*. Running throughout the novel is a sense of failure to assimilate with mainstream American culture that James and the children have all experienced. From the time he was a young boy being brought up by Chinese immigrants on the grounds of a private school for rich boys in Iowa, James has felt a profound alienation from mainstream American society. Starting when he was just a young kid, James was made fun of by his peers and called derogatory names for Chinese. Also notable is Ng's decision to use the word "Oriental" when describing or when others describe the Lees. This word is no longer politically correct, but in keeping with the setting of late 1970's America the term is used to put the reader off guard. When James gets to Harvard to study as an undergraduate and later graduate student, he chooses the most American topic he can think of to study, the American cowboy.

Yet even in the present day of the story James is suspicious of not being accepted. Paranoid, he envisions the police and his peers like Stanley Hewitt see him as subservient, so when Marilyn tosses the word "kowtow" out to describe his behavior towards the police, something in James snaps. James does not believe other people take him seriously, and, worse, he sees that he is slipping into the obedient behavior stereotypical of his Chinese heritage.



Marilyn and James have a tense conversation sparked by Marilyn's frustrations that the police have stopped looking for Lydia. She says, "If she were a white girl, they'd keep looking," which James counters with, "If she were a white girl none of this would ever have happened." Marilyn rarely - if ever - confronts James with her frustrations with their failure to assimilate and be welcomed into the community. She shows no desire to become friends with the other moms or to socialize, yet the police's failure to find Lydia sparks a frustration within her. She does not realize, however, that her husband has been waiting for her to voice his biggest fears, that she agrees with him and sees it, too: Lydia's death is a result of her mixed racial heritage. When Lydia dies, James sees this as the ultimate confirmation that his daughter had inherited an unconquerable obstacle to fitting in, his Chinese ethnicity.

All throughout Lydia's life James pressured her into making friends with other girls her age and spending time with her peers to the point where Lydia felt like she had to invent conversations on the phone with other girls in her class. James was relentless, harassing Lydia about going to dances and giving her books about how to make friends and get people to like you. Just as Marilyn placed pressure on Lydia to realize her own failed dreams to become a doctor, James pressured Lydia in a different way but with a similar goal: to assimilate into American culture and be accepted as American, not as an outsider. James' reaction to Lydia's death is to be so full of regret and guilt that he voices out loud his feelings that she would have been better off having never been born, something that deeply wounds James. Her failure to blossom socially is his own.

Marilyn and James handle Lydia's death in different ways. Marilyn does not initially blame herself or see that she could have contributed towards her daughter's suicide. James, on the other hand, picks up much more quickly that Lydia committed suicide, a realization that Marilyn rejects. Marilyn has never felt the same sense of being "different" that James and his children feel because Marilyn, with her honey-colored blonde hair and blue eyes, is the picture of Southern American beauty. Part of what drew Marilyn to James was, apart from truly loving him, Marilyn saw James as an opportunity to stand out from the crowd and especially her mother. At the same time, James saw Marilyn as a way to marry into American culture. If Marilyn loved him, he realized, America would accept him as well. These two fundamentally at-odds sentiments from Marilyn and James drive a tension between them which gets left unsaid for much of the novel. When James reminds Marilyn of what she said to him on their wedding day, that her mother wanted her to marry someone more like her, James reveals how deeply wounded he was by that statement. It is something that he has assumed into his identity until he believes it to be true.

In the weeks after Lydia's death, James begins an affair with his Chinese teaching assistant, Louisa. Louisa provides the invitation to her house, and James follows her. In a moment of passion, James says to Louisa, "You're the kind of girl I should have married," as if everything would have turned out better if he had married someone who shared his heritage. Ultimately James returns home and reconciles with Marilyn, but the stinging failure of Lydia's suicide and the implications is has for what kind of life she could have led if she were white haunt James long after the close of the novel.



Nath and Lydia are just as outwardly teased as James was when he was growing up. For Nath and Lydia, who stick together and rarely go through the school day apart, they are simply rejected by their peers. Nath had a taste early on of how others might see him at the swimming pool when the kids mocked him and called him a "chink" until Jack broke the ice and ended his turn at the Marco Polo game. James does not place the same pressure to socialize on Nath that he does on Lydia. As such, Nath settles into a life with little to no friends but still retains an optimism for the future in college and looks forward to socializing with Harvard students when he does an overnight visit. The reader closes the book having confidence that Nath will be able to have a more active social life when he gets to college.

Lydia is also outwardly called a derogatory name and has to endure mocking gestures. Her peers shun her and rarely invite her anywhere. She never overcomes her shyness and seems to be pigeonholed into being a quiet and reserved girl and never breaks out of that mold except in the last months of her life when she spends time with Jack. At the novel's close, then, the reader is left with hope for Nath that he will succeed in college and avoid the trappings of the social isolation his sister and father experienced.

Medicine/Science

Medicine and Science are prominent themes in *Everything I Never Told You* that reveal much about gender discrepancies in America in 1977 and before. Marilyn expresses a desire to study Science from a young age. She pivots away from her mother's pressure to become a housewife and study home economics and housewifery. Marilyn rejects culinary arts and instead focuses on physics, her favorite subject, when she is in college at Harvard. The only woman in the classroom, Marilyn has to endure sexist remarks from her peers and her professors. She has a fanatical devotion to her studies and finds refuge in Science and the pursuit of Medicine not least because "It was the furthest thing she could imagine from her mother's life." But finding unexpected love with James, marrying him, and having his baby sets Marilyn back and she has to put her Science studies on hold, promising herself she would return one day.

Marilyn's pursuit of Science and Medicine are partially sincere--she really does long to help other people and "save lives"--and is partially reactionary to becoming what her mother stood for: domesticity, subservience, and pleasing a husband and their children. What Marilyn never sees is the parallel between her love for Science and her mother's mastery of a different kind of science: Culinary Arts. Later Marilyn will rescue her mother's beloved Betty Crocker cookbook as her only memento from her mother's life. Marilyn never sees the irony that her mother's Science also involved chemistry, measurements, properties of heat and conduction, and formulas in the form of recipes. Instead, Marilyn's hostility to Culinary Arts blinds her from the fact that her love for Science is perhaps inherited from her mother in ways she does not realize. Instead, Marilyn will paint her mother with the ultimate insult she can imagine: a woman whose only legacy is what she cooked. Marilyn turns away from cooking and never prepares any food from scratch for her family.



Marilyn, inspired by her encounter with Dr. Wolff in the local hospital and still wounded from the crushing blow that James' colleague was never serious about hiring her as a lab assistant, becomes motivated to abandon her family, move to Toledo, and take the remaining science prerequisites that she needs to apply to medical school. Marilyn ultimately fails when she realizes she is pregnant with another child born out of a passionate moment with James before she left. At the hospital, waiting for stitches from a "Dr. Greene," Marilyn realizes that she had assumed her doctor would be a woman. The fact that she is wrong devastates Marilyn. She, too, had fallen into the trap of never factoring women into the equation of the medical profession. Moreover, she has to give up her dream and accept that her life is her family. This represents a loss perhaps more crushing than her mother's death. Marilyn grieves that she will never be able to realize her dream, but instead finds a new outlet for it: Lydia.

When Lydia tells her mother that she lost the cookbook, Marilyn seizes this statement (which is in fact a lie) as proof of her daughter's turn away from home economics. She buys Medicine and Science reference books for Lydia, some heavier than her daughter can hold up, and reads them to her. Marilyn does not see that she is doing exactly what her mother tried to do for her: mold her daughter into a realization of her own dreams. However, whereas her mother's prodding was more subtle--in the end she did not abandon her daughter when she pursued Science, only tried to guide her towards a successful marriage--Marilyn takes the reigns of Lydia's life and approaches shaping her future in a much more methodical and even scientific way. By dictating what subjects Lydia takes and how she will go about becoming a doctor, a career Lydia agrees with because she is desperate to do anything her mother wants as long as she stays with them--Marilyn plots out her career path meticulously, leaving no room for human error or a chance that her daughter might not be as brilliant at Science as she was.

Lydia is indeed not as talented at physics as her mother, and by the end of her first semester in an advanced class she is failing. The fear she has to tell her mother this, a necessary action since she needs her failed exam signed by a parent, paralyzes her. She fully realizes and buckles under the pressure her mother places upon her, noting that a future without Medicine is not possible for her: "It was always there. Lydia could not imagine another future, another life." Yet Lydia manipulates the celebratory moment with Nath's acceptance to Harvard to call down to the living room that she is failing physics. In this way, Lydia still tries to use the weapon she has to distract everyone from her brother's eventual abandonment of her and a gathering in which she is not the center of attention. Instead of waiting for a quieter moment, she chooses the timing of her delivery strategically because she is worried the balance has been upset between her being the focal point of her parents' attention. Thus, in the end Science and Medicine, however painful and challenging for Lydia, are still weapons she has for remaining the glue that holds together her mother's vision.



Secrecy and Secrets

The theme of Secrecy and Secrets is apparent in the novel's title; "Everything I Never Told You" implies withholding information, and indeed this is what the characters in the novel excel at, to the detriment of their relationships and lives. In the first chapter, Marilyn considers how Lydia had Secrets even from a young age. Marilyn turned around once to find 11-month-old Lydia walking on her own. Marilyn was shocked and wondered how her daughter had kept this new skill from her. "What else have you been hiding?" she wonders and observes that, "Lydia, still small enough to cradle, had secrets." However, Lydia at age 5 was confused when her mother told her the diary she bought her for Christmas was for keeping Secrets. Puzzled, Lydia tells her that she has no Secrets. As the reader sees and the Lees eventually discover, this could not be further from the truth. In the end, one of the central messages and lessons of the book is the harm in keeping emotions, opinions, and facts from the ones you love.

As the novel progresses, the reader understands that all of the Lees have Secrets that they keep from each other. Lydia initially keeps from her parents that she is failing physics. Buckling under pressure from her father to socialize, Lydia pretends to talk to classmates on the phone when in fact she is talking to the dial tone. She maintains a facade that she spends time with friends at school when in fact she is not close to anyone but Nath and, in her final months alive, Jack Wolff. Lydia also resists telling her brother that she stole his acceptance letter to Harvard. Lydia also hides the Betty Crocker cookbook and tells her mother that she lost it even though she reads it from time to time. Perhaps the biggest Secret she keeps is how depressed, stressed, and alone she feels, a fatal Secret.

Lydia's new friend, their neighbor Jack, also keeps his love for Nath a Secret and buries his sexual confusion in an endless stream of girls. Rather than reveal his love for Nath, Jack accepts his blame for Lydia's death.

Hannah, too, keeps Secrets from her family. For instance, in the first chapter it is revealed that she suspects she heard Lydia leave the house at 2 a.m. the night she went missing. Instead of telling her family this, Hannah keeps it to herself even though it might be crucial information to solving the mystery of Lydia's disappearance. Later, the reader sees how Hannah witnesses a moment of gentle longing from Jack that reveals to her that he is attracted to Nath. Yet she does not tell anyone.

Nath, too, keeps Secrets from his family. For example, he knows that Lydia has no friends at school, but he does not tell anyone to preserve some measure of dignity for his sister lest he reveal her failure to socialize. Nath also suspects that his father is having an affair and eventually does tell his mother. The Lee children withhold information from each other and do not voice their Secrets because their parents have created a culture of repression and silence. Lydia cannot handle the pressure from her parents and instead of voicing her struggles feels that she is not in a position where she can safely reveal her emotions and longings.



The Lee parents also keep Secrets. James does not let on about how much he was wounded by Marilyn's comment at their wedding that her mother wishes she was marrying someone more like her. James never feels like he can voice his Secret suspicions that their family is discriminated against until Lydia's death when they both admit their feelings that the case would have been treated differently if Lydia were a white girl. He also has an affair with his teaching assistant, Louisa, and does not tell Marilyn. Similarly, the summer after Lydia dies James says that he teaching a summer class which is in fact not true. A fundamental misunderstanding in their relationship early on hurts Marilyn and James when they do not reveal their motives for being together. They indeed love each other but also seem more in love with the idea of for Marilyn, standing out, and for James, blending in.

On her end, Marilyn never tells James about how she longs to resume her studies. She feels her only option is to abandon the family. Yet James does not seem the type to crush his wife's dreams. He never belittles her hopes or treats her like a woman who is out of her league in advanced science classes. Perhaps if Marilyn had felt like she could talk to James about it her life could have gone a different way. However, rather than taking a chance on talking honestly with her husband, Marilyn harbors a secret resentment of her life and channels all of her frustration on Lydia.

Astronomy

Astronomy emerges as a theme shortly after Marilyn abandons her family. One morning Nath turns on the television and sees the newscaster Walter Cronkite narrating the rocket launch of the Gemini 9 space shuttle. Completely entranced, Nath becomes obsessed with Astronomy and space travel. He latches on to the idea that far above the earth everything on the planet would be invisible, including, for Nath: "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." Completely taken with space travel, Nath talks about the mission's astronauts as if they are close friends, researches as much as he can about astronomy, and recites details about the astronauts to Lydia and James at the breakfast table to James' growing irritation. When Nath pushes him too far with a trivia fact, James slaps his son and chides him for getting caught up in something so trivial when there are bigger problems for them, namely that Marilyn has disappeared.

By slapping Nath, James shows that he does not want to encourage Nath's interest in Astronomy. In fact, James does not give Nath much attention at all in the coming years, so Nath is left to plot his future in Astronomy without any parental encouragement. This is highly ironic because Astronomy is a science that involves a great deal of skill in physics, Marilyn's pet subject. Whereas Lydia struggles with physics, Nath excels in it and secretly plans to study Astronomy in college. Yet Marilyn does not even notice or praise him. Instead of asking him to tutor Lydia, she turns a blind eye to her son's talent even though it is based on difficult scientific concepts. Rather than protest his position as the neglected and attention-starved eldest child in the family, Nath accepts his role in



maintaining his mother's happiness and father's delicate mood as they barely tolerate him.

Beyond the times when astronomy makes a literal appearance as a science and a career, the language of astronomy is sprinkled throughout the novel to help characterize the Lee family. Astronomical language is used especially to describe the Lees and the family dynamics within the household. In Chapter 7 the narrator describes how "...Lydia herself--the reluctant center of their universe--every day, she held their world together" after Marilyn returns from Toledo and the parents begin to focus all their energy and attention on Lydia. Earlier in the novel, Lydia and Nath wake up each day the summer Marilyn is gone "[wondering] for just a moment if the universe had righted itself: perhaps they might enter the kitchen and find their mother at the stove, waiting for them with love and kisses and hard-boiled eggs." When the center of the Lee universe is absent--early on it is Marilyn, later it will be Lydia--the fragile family system does not work. James becomes volatile and hostile when Marilyn is gone and is reckless after Lydia dies. Hannah struggles with the absence of her sister and becoming the object of newfound attention and love.

Moreover, in Chapter 7 the narrator uses astronomical language again to describe Lydia's place in the family. As soon as he pushes her into the water, Nath realizes that his sister has also understood what has happened to their family and is not entirely comfortable under the pressure her parents place on her: "She had staggered so readily, fell so eagerly, that she and Nath both knew: that she felt it, too, this pull she now exerted, and didn't want it. That the weight of everything tilting toward her was too much." Using these words--"pull," "exert," "weight," "tilt"--characterize Lydia as magnetic, but this position does not come without a price. Weighted in Lydia, the Lee universe is fragile and susceptible to instability if something goes wrong with Lydia. In Chapter 12, the narrator will describe Hannah's discovery of the footprint on the wall "...as if she's discovered a new planet." The footprint represents a new way for the Lees to align their universe with new bonds being made among the family members and the welcoming of Hannah into the family's awareness and attention. The act of discovering a new planet paves the way for the universe to be reordered in the wake of the central planetary body--Lydia--being gone.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view in *Everything I Never Told You* is third person. The narrator focuses attention on all five of the Lees and therefore anchors the story with the family as opposed to the police or other characters like Jack or Louisa. The narrator is omniscient and all-knowing, and the reader learns to trust him or her right away from the opening lines where the reader receives the privileged information that the Lees do not know yet, that Lydia is dead. Given this, the narrator can be considered trustworthy and reliable. Allowing the reader to see and know everything, including the characters' secret feelings and actions, the point of view lets the reader make his or her own judgment of who or what was responsible for Lydia's suicide. This knowledge gives the reader the power to see Lydia's fate as a result of forces she could not control, such as her parents' backgrounds, relationship, and her own choices. The reader is permitted to draw his or her own conclusions from what the narrator has told us. Furthermore, this indicates a mutual trust; the reader trusts the narrator and his or her ability to dole out facts and key quotes or events and in turn the narrator trusts the reader with this information.

Language and Meaning

The language in *Everything I Never Told You* is often lyrical, meaning that the prose often has a rhythmic and poetic quality to it. The characters' thoughts are italicized to distinguish them from what is spoken out loud, a choice that points out how at odds the Lees often are between what they really want to say and what they actually share with others. This also gives the reader the unique advantage of being a witness to the frequently conflicting thoughts and actions of the Lee family and enlightens the reader on how the Lees' lives could have turned out differently if they had spoken how they really feel. The language of the novel is punctuated by intermediate to advanced vocabulary words some of which, such as "kowtow" are not explained. Instead the reader who is not familiar with the term is left to discern its meaning from the reactions of James, Marilyn, and Hannah. In keeping with the time period and setting of the novel, 1970s America, the James and the Lee children are known as "Oriental" rather than "Asian," which is seen as the more politically correct term today.

Structure

Everything I Never Told You is divided into 12 chapters and takes place over the span of decades. Often the narrator will cover a multi-generational story in the course of one chapter, as in Chapter 2, which details James and Marilyn's backgrounds as well as those of their parents. The structure weaves back and forth between the present day of 1977 and events in the past. Although the narrator opens Chapter 2 with the question,



"How had it begun?" and attempts to trace a cause and effect timeline in the Lees' history, the reader is left to decide if any one event, thought, or conversation is directly responsible for Lydia's death. This asks the reader to consider if Lydia's decision to commit suicide was inevitable or preventable.

Ng frequently uses foreshadowing as a literary device to inform the reader of an important part of the story which will later be explained. For instance, Marilyn's disappearance is mentioned in passing by the police in Chapter 1 and by the narrator in the opening lines of Chapter 2 but is not explained in detail until Chapter 4. Another example would be Lydia's locket, which first makes an appearance in Chapter 5 when Hannah finds it behind Lydia's bed, yet the reader has to wait to learn the story behind the locket until Chapter 11. This use of foreshadowing is effective because it takes different episodes in the novel and unites them so that no action, thought, or object is meaningless but is, rather, part of the larger tapestry of Lydia's death and the Lee family's dynamics. This structure allows for a tight story where space is economized so symbols, objects, and conversations are returned to over and over again, their meaning gradually revealed in the course of the larger narrative.



Quotes

Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet. 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but this innocuous fact: Lydia is late for breakfast.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: The title of the novel, "Everything I Never Told You," hints at one of the major themes of the book: keeping secrets. By opening her novel with "Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet" Ng welcomes the reader into that world by giving the reader knowledge the characters do not have. This also indicates a certain level of trust the reader should place in the narrator; because the narrator is all-knowing, he or she will be able to dispense privileged information as the story requires. Furthermore, by mentioning Lydia in the first sentence the narrator makes it clear that Lydia is one of if not the most central character.

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

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: The opening lines of Chapter 2, this quote touches on a theme that runs throughout the book: inheritance. The quote illustrates how the foundation of the Lee children's personalities and indeed Lydia's fate lies with her parents and their parents. It also gives some agency to Lydia: her fate was determined by how she reacted to her mother's disappearance. The quote describes the central tension between Marilyn and James, with Marilyn wanted to distinguish herself from other people and James wanted to assimilate and be indistinguishable from others. Ultimately, the narrator says, this was impossible. This quote also introduces some significant foreshadowing. Marilyn's disappearance does not occur for several chapters and even then the event and Lydia and Nath's reaction to it are spread out over future chapters. Yet at its heart this chapter is about how Marilyn and James met and the circumstances of their childhood and relationships with their own parents, a storyline that this quote introduces.

Somewhere in this room, she is sure, is the answer to what happened. And there, on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, she sees the neat row of diaries lined up by year. Marilyn had given Lydia her first diary the Christmas she was five, a flowered one with gilt edges and a key lighter than a paper clip. Her daughter had unwrapped it and turned it over and over in her hands, touching the tiny keyhole, as if she didn't know what it was for. 'For writing down your secrets,' Marilyn had said with a smile, and Lydia had smiled back up at her and said, 'But Mom, I don't have any secrets.'

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 73)

Importance: This quote demonstrates an inconsistency inherent in Marilyn and Lydia's relationship. Lydia claims that she has no secrets and is puzzled by the diary which



Marilyn gave her. Presumably Marilyn believes this means she does not have any secrets to keep from her and that she knows all there is to know about her daughter. Now that her daughter has gone missing and died, however, Marilyn believes Lydia must have had secrets that she recorded in there anyway which will allow her to solve the mystery of Lydia's death. What she discovers is that if Lydia did have secrets she kept them to herself and either did not think they were worth recording or did not trust they could be kept safe on paper from other eyes, even under the safety of lock and key. Marilyn realizes that it is going to be more of a challenge than she thought to find out the truth.

Never, she promised herself. I will never end up like that." (Note: This part is in italics: 'Never' 'I will never end up like that')
-- Marilyn (Chapter 4 paragraph 30)

Importance: This quote, which is repeated twice in the space of just a few paragraphs, explains the mantra that Marilyn adopts after her mother dies. She is determined not to become someone who is only remembered by what she cooked like her mother was. After she returns home she decides to continue to pursue being a doctor in defiance of becoming a housewife at any costs, even if it means abandoning her family. Her mother's legacy as a homemaker continues to haunt her even after she returns home, and Marilyn only ever buys prepared food from there on out. Yet she, like her mother, pressures her daughter to do well in school and not fail her pet subject, for Doris it is home economics and for Marilyn it is physics. Once Marilyn accepts that she has ended up like her mother in some ways--as a housewife--she focuses on Lydia's future. Ultimately her decision to apply her failed hopes and dreams to her daughter contribute to Lydia's demise.

As one of only two Orientals at Middlewood High--the other being her brother, Nathan--Lee stood out in the halls. However, few seemed to have known her well.
-- Local Newspaper (Chapter 5 paragraph 24)

Importance: This quote appears in a local newspaper story about Lydia's disappearance that James picks up and reads. He is haunted by the way that Lydia and Nath are described, as the only two Asian students at the high school, and it drives home his own personal failure to assimilate throughout his life. When Lydia was alive, James focused on pressuring her into making friends with other people and going to dances. He wanted her to fit in and be popular, yet this quote says she did not do that and did not really know anybody well. His hopes that she would overcome her background and thrive among the white families in their town are dashed by this revelation. This quote reveals James' misery at what his children have inherited from him.

Mama,' she said into her mother's hip now. 'While you were gone. Your cookbook.' She swallowed. 'I--lost it.'
-- Lydia (Chapter 6 paragraph 76)

Importance: In this quote readers see Lydia lying to her mother about losing Marilyn's



mother's cookbook. In fact, Lydia has kept it and reads it throughout the years. However, Marilyn takes this as a sign that by losing Doris' cookbook Lydia has symbolically rejected the homemaker fate that Marilyn herself could not escape. Without realizing it, Lydia has answered Marilyn's request that she and Nath be "good" while she was away. Lydia has made a promise to herself that if only her mother would come home she would do whatever she says if it will keep her from abandoning them again. By greeting her mother with this lie she has given Marilyn an opening to start defining what it is she wants her daughter to do.

I dunno,' she said. 'People decide what you're like before they even get to know you.' She eyed him, suddenly fierce. 'Kind of like you did with me. They think they know all about you. Except you're never who they think you are.
-- Lydia (Chapter 7 paragraph 157)

Importance: Here we see a glimpse of Lydia's frustration with others' perception of her as she tries to assert her own opinions and desires in the car with Jack. Her words express her struggle to define and realize her own unique identity. She also hints at the secrecy within her own life by saying that she is not who other people think she is. As readers have seen by her actions and words so far in the novel, Lydia struggles to define herself as someone other than what her mother wants her to be, a young woman interested in and committed to a career in medicine. Meanwhile, Lydia is failing physics and harbors a secret interest in cooking, something her mother hates. Likewise, she hides that she is friendless from her father and pretends to talk to her classmates on the phone while she is in fact just listening to the dialtone. Lydia ultimately weighs the cost of telling her parents that she is not who they want her to be against the cost of dying and determines it would be more favorable to take her life rather than admit to them who she really is.

If she were a white girl,' he says, 'none of this would have ever happened.
-- James (Chapter 8 paragraph 31)

Importance: In this quote James voices his secret fear that he is responsible for Lydia's death, which he now accepts as suicide. Marilyn, meanwhile, still denies that the death was a suicide. James then mentally retraces Lydia's tragic fate back to their marriage and even to their initial attraction to each other. It is, as he admits, "a mistake." James believes his own insecurities and identity as an outsider are direct causes of Lydia's suicide and goes on to repeat what Marilyn said to him at her wedding, that her mother believed she should have married someone more like her. Here, readers see that James has never forgotten what Marilyn told him. It planted an idea in his mind, confirming his secret fears, that he was corrupting Marilyn. By saying that Lydia's death never would have happened if she were white, James conveys his shame and guilt that leads all the way back to his relationship with Marilyn.

Look at me,' Marilyn cupped Lydia's chin in her hand and thought of all the things her mother had never said to her, the things she had longed, her entire life, to hear. 'You have your whole life in front of you. You can do anything you want.' She paused, looking over Lydia's shoulder at the shelf crammed with books, the stethoscope atop the



bookshelf, the neat mosaic of the periodic table. 'When I'm dead, that's all I want you to remember.

-- Marilyn (Chapter 9 paragraph 25)

Importance: This quote contains one of Marilyn and Lydia's final conversations before Lydia's death. Marilyn's request that Lydia remembers that she can do anything she wants appears to be a reaction to the discouragement her own mother piled on her. Doris' death represented a brief window of hope for Marilyn; she believed that with her mother's death and her determination to never end up like her mother would allow her to pursue a career in medicine. However, her failed attempt to break free from her family closed the door on her aspirations. Curiously, Marilyn's actions--pressuring her daughter to take advanced courses in science and math and buying her medical textbooks as presents--are at odds with her message. Lydia's actions in wake of their conversation suggest that she buckled under her mother's words and did not believe her. Marilyn's message was too little, too late.

You got tired of different, didn't you?' he says. 'I'm too different. Your mother knew it right away. You think it's a good thing, standing out. But look at you. Just look at you.

-- James (Chapter 10 paragraph 15)

Importance: With these words James frees his secret fear, that his wife is ashamed of him and his identity as an outsider. James suggests that Marilyn was initially drawn to him for the novelty of standing out and being different from everyone else, possibly in open defiance of her mother's message of conformity to social norms. Yet James does not admit to Marilyn that he, too, was drawn to her because she represented "different." In their earliest encounters James described sleeping with Marilyn as having it be like America herself was accepting him. This quote also shows James' hurt and resentment over Doris' characterization of him as too different, as not like Marilyn and therefore not a worthy choice. As readers saw in an earlier chapter, Marilyn's aside to James at their wedding that her mother wanted her to marry someone more like her is a statement that has never left James and contributes even years later to his sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

Don't ever smile if you don't want to,' she said, and Hannah, half-blinded by the spotlight of Lydia's whole attention, nodded. 'Remember that.

-- Lydia (Chapter 11 paragraph 38)

Importance: This statement, made by Lydia to Hannah, is made in the wake of the fight Hannah and Lydia have over the necklace that James gave Lydia for her birthday. Happening days before Lydia's death, the fight between the sisters breaks out when Lydia discovers that Hannah has stolen the necklace. Lydia commands Hannah never to wear it and tells her that she does not have to smile if she does not want to, reflecting her wish for her sister to live a different life from her own. She also hearkens back to her father's words when he gave her the locket and made her promise him she would always smile when she looked at it. She believes that her obedience to smiling when she was not happy and being the daughter her mother and father wanted her to be have destroyed her life and contributed to her decision to end her life. Lydia wants her sister



to live a life of authenticity, and she believes that in this heated moment her words will have a lasting effect on her sister so she does not end up like her.

I thought you'd gone,' she says at last. When James's voice squeezes around the sharp thing in his throat, it comes out thin and scratched. 'I thought you had.

-- James (Chapter 12 paragraph 23)

Importance: In the final chapter James and Marilyn reunite each sharing a believe that the other had "gone." At this point in the story both Marilyn and James have had periods of time where they abandoned the family, Marilyn years earlier when she moved away to take classes and James when he stayed with Louisa. On some level Marilyn and James are each referring to these absences, yet they are also referring to the sense of being "gone" from their marriage. In the wake of Lydia's disappearance and death, Marilyn and James' relationship weakened rather than strengthened in the wake of the tragedy. Here they admit that they share a bond in their belief of the other's abandonment. However, the use of the past tense demonstrates that they are moving into a new stage where they are no longer "gone" and are now "back" together.