



"Witty, wise, and tender. It's a marvel." —Paula Hawkins, author of
THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN and INTO THE WATER

Little Fires Everywhere

A NOVEL

Celeste Ng

Bestselling author of
EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU

ALSO BY CELESTE NG

Everything I Never Told You



LITTLE

FIRES

EVERYWHERE

CELESTE NG

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Version_1

To those out on their own paths, setting little fires

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Whether you buy a homesite in the School Section, broad acres in the Shaker Country Estates, or one of the houses offered by this company in a choice of neighborhoods, your purchase includes facilities for golf, riding, tennis, boating; it includes unexcelled schools; and it includes protection forever against depreciation and unwelcome change.

—Advertisement, The Van Sweringen Company, Creators and Developers
of Shaker Village



Actually, though, all things considered, people from Shaker Heights are basically pretty much like people everywhere else in America. They may have three or four cars instead of one or two, and they may have two television sets instead of one, and when a Shaker Heights girl gets married she may have a reception for eight hundred, with the Meyer Davis band flown in from New York, instead of a wedding reception for a hundred with a local band, but these are all differences of degree rather than fundamental differences. “We’re friendly people and we have a wonderful time!” said a woman at the Shaker Heights Country Club recently, and she was right, for the inhabitants of Utopia do, in fact, appear to lead a rather happy life.

—“The Good Life in Shaker Heights,” *Cosmopolitan*, March 1963

Everyone in Shaker Heights was talking about it that summer: how Isabelle, the last of the Richardson children, had finally gone around the bend and burned the house down. All spring the gossip had been about little Mirabelle McCullough—or, depending which side you were on, May Ling Chow—and now, at last, there was something new and sensational to discuss. A little after noon on that Saturday in May, the shoppers pushing their grocery carts in Heinen's heard the fire engines wail to life and careen away, toward the duck pond. By a quarter after twelve there were four of them parked in a haphazard red line along Parkland Drive, where all six bedrooms of the Richardson house were ablaze, and everyone within a half mile could see the smoke rising over the trees like a dense black thundercloud. Later people would say that the signs had been there all along: that Izzy was a little lunatic, that there had always been something *off* about the Richardson family, that as soon as they heard the sirens that morning they *knew* something terrible had happened. By then, of course, Izzy would be long gone, leaving no one to defend her, and people could—and did—say whatever they liked. At the moment the fire trucks arrived, though, and for quite a while afterward, no one knew what was happening. Neighbors clustered as close to the makeshift barrier—a police cruiser, parked crosswise a few hundred yards away—as they could and watched the firefighters unreel their hoses with the grim faces of men who recognized a hopeless cause. Across the street, the geese at the pond ducked their heads underwater for weeds, wholly unruffled by the commotion.

Mrs. Richardson stood on the tree lawn, clutching the neck of her pale blue robe closed. Although it was already afternoon, she had still been asleep when the smoke detectors had sounded. She had gone to bed late, and had slept in on purpose, telling herself she deserved it after a rather difficult day. The night before, she had watched from an upstairs window as a car had finally pulled up in front of the house. The driveway was long and circular, a deep horseshoe arc bending from the curb to the front door and back—so the street was a good

hundred feet away, too far for her to see clearly, and even in May, at eight o'clock it was almost dark, besides. But she had recognized the small tan Volkswagen of her tenant, Mia, its headlights shining. The passenger door opened and a slender figure emerged, leaving the door ajar: Mia's teenage daughter, Pearl. The dome light lit the inside of the car like a shadow box, but the car was packed with bags nearly to the ceiling and Mrs. Richardson could only just make out the faint silhouette of Mia's head, the messy topknot perched at the crown of her head. Pearl bent over the mailbox, and Mrs. Richardson imagined the faint squeak as the mailbox door opened, then shut. Then Pearl hopped back into the car and closed the door. The brake lights flared red, then winked out, and the car pattered off into the growing night. With a sense of relief, Mrs. Richardson had gone down to the mailbox and found a set of keys on a plain ring, with no note. She had planned to go over in the morning and check the rental house on Winslow Road, even though she already knew that they would be gone.

It was because of this that she had allowed herself to sleep in, and now it was half past twelve and she was standing on the tree lawn in her robe and a pair of her son Trip's tennis shoes, watching their house burn to the ground. When she had awoken to the shrill scream of the smoke detector, she ran from room to room looking for him, for Lexie, for Moody. It struck her that she had not looked for Izzy, as if she had known already that Izzy was to blame. Every bedroom was empty except for the smell of gasoline and a small crackling fire set directly in the middle of each bed, as if a demented Girl Scout had been camping there. By the time she checked the living room, the family room, the rec room, and the kitchen, the smoke had begun to spread, and she ran outside at last to hear the sirens, alerted by their home security system, already approaching. Out in the driveway, she saw that Trip's Jeep was gone, as was Lexie's Explorer, and Moody's bike, and, of course, her husband's sedan. He usually went into the office to play catch-up on Saturday mornings. Someone would have to call him at work. She remembered then that Lexie, thank god, had stayed over at Serena Wong's house last night. She wondered where Izzy had gotten to. She wondered where her sons were, and how she would find them to tell them what had happened.



By the time the fire was put out the house had not, despite Mrs. Richardson's fears, quite burned to the ground. The windows were all gone but the brick shell of the house remained, damp and blackened and steaming, and most of the roof, the dark slate shingles gleaming like fish scales from their recent soaking. The Richardsons would not be allowed inside for another few days, until the fire department's engineers had tested each of the beams still standing, but even from the tree lawn—the closest the yellow CAUTION tape would allow them to come—they could see there was little inside to be saved.

"Jesus Christ," Lexie said. She was perched on the roof of her car, which was now parked across the street, on the grass bordering the duck pond. She and Serena had still been asleep, curled up back-to-back in Serena's queen size, when Dr. Wong shook her shoulder just after one, whispering, "Lexie. Lexie, honey. Wake up. Your mom just called." They had stayed up past two A.M., talking—as they had been all spring—about little Mirabelle McCullough, arguing about whether the judge had decided right or wrong, about whether her new parents should've gotten custody or if she should've been given back to her own mother. "Her name isn't even really Mirabelle McCullough, for god's sake," Serena had said at last, and they'd lapsed into sullen, troubled silence until they both fell asleep.

Now Lexie watched the smoke billow from her bedroom window, the front one that looked over the lawn, and thought of everything inside that was gone. Every T-shirt in her dresser, every pair of jeans in her closet. All the notes Serena had written her since the sixth grade, still folded in paper footballs, which she'd kept in a shoebox under her bed; the bed itself, the very sheets and comforter charred to a crisp. The rose corsage her boyfriend, Brian, had given her at homecoming, hung to dry on her vanity, the petals darkened from ruby to dried-blood red. Now it was nothing but ashes. In the change of clothes she had brought to Serena's, Lexie realized suddenly, she was better off than the rest of her family: in the backseat she had a duffel bag, a pair of jeans, a toothbrush. Pajamas. She glanced at her brothers, at her mother, still in her bathrobe on their tree lawn, and thought, *They have literally nothing but the clothes on their backs.* *Literally* was one of Lexie's favorite words, which she deployed even when the situation was anything but literal. In this case, for once, it was more or less true.

Trip, from his spot beside her, absentmindedly ran one hand through his hair. The sun was high overhead now and the sweat made his curls stand up rather rakishly. He had been playing basketball at the community center when he heard fire trucks

wailing, but had thought nothing of it. (This morning he had been particularly preoccupied, but in truth he likely would not have noticed anyway.) Then, at one, when everyone got hungry and decided to call it a game, he had driven home. True to form, even with the windows down he had not noticed the huge cloud of smoke wafting toward him, and he only began to realize something was wrong when he found his street blocked off by a police car. After ten minutes of explaining, he had finally been allowed to park his Jeep across from the house, where Lexie and Moody were already waiting. The three of them sat on the car's roof in order, as they had in all the family portraits that had once hung in the stairwell and were now reduced to ash. Lexie, Trip, Moody: senior, junior, sophomore. Beside them they felt the hole that Izzy, the freshman, the black sheep, the wild card, had left behind—though they were still certain, all of them, that this hole would be temporary.

“What was she thinking?” Moody muttered, and Lexie said, “Even *she* knows she's gone too far this time, that's why she ran off. When she comes back, Mom is going to murder her.”

“Where are we going to stay?” Trip asked. A moment of silence unreeled as they contemplated their situation.

“We'll get a hotel room or something,” said Lexie finally. “I think that's what Josh Trammell's family did.” Everyone knew this story: how a few years ago Josh Trammell, a sophomore, had fallen asleep with a candle lit and burned his parents' house down. The long-standing rumor at the high school was that it wasn't a candle, it was a joint, but the house had been so thoroughly gutted there was no way to tell, and Josh had stuck to his candle story. Everyone still thought of him as *that dumbass jock who burned the house down*, even though that had been ages ago, and Josh had recently graduated from Ohio State with honors. Now, of course, Josh Trammell's fire would no longer be the most famous fire in Shaker Heights.

“One hotel room? For all of us?”

“Whatever. Two rooms. Or we'll stay at the Embassy Suites. I don't know.” Lexie tapped her fingers against her knee. She wanted a cigarette, but after what had just happened—and in full view of her mother and ten firemen—she didn't dare light one. “Mom and Dad will figure it out. And the insurance will pay for it.” Although she had only a vague sense of how insurance worked, this seemed plausible. In any case, this was a problem for the adults, not for them.

The last of the firemen were emerging from the house, pulling the masks from their faces. Most of the smoke had gone, but a mugginess still hung everywhere, like the air in the bathroom after a long, hot

shower. The roof of the car was getting hot, and Trip stretched his legs down the windshield, poking the wipers with the toe of his flip-flop. Then he started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Lexie said.

“Just picturing Izzy running around striking matches everywhere.” He snorted. “The nutcase.”

Moody drummed a finger on the roof rack. “Why is everybody so sure she did it?”

“Come on.” Trip jumped down off the car. “It’s *Izzy*. And we’re all here. Mom’s here. Dad’s on his way. Who’s missing?”

“So Izzy’s not here. She’s the only one who could be responsible?”

“*Responsible?*” put in Lexie. “Izzy?”

“Dad was at work,” Trip said. “Lexie was at Serena’s. I was over at Sussex playing ball. You?”

Moody hesitated. “I biked over to the library.”

“There. You see?” To Trip, the answer was obvious. “The only ones here were Izzy and Mom. And Mom was asleep.”

“Maybe the wiring in the house shorted. Or maybe someone left the stove on.”

“The firemen said there were little fires everywhere,” Lexie said. “Multiple points of origin. Possible use of accelerant. Not an accident.”

“We all know she’s always been mental.” Trip leaned back against the car door.

“You’re all always picking on her,” Moody said. “Maybe that’s why she acts *mental*.”

Across the street, the fire trucks began to reel in their hoses. The three remaining Richardson children watched the firemen set down their axes and peel away their smoky yellow coats.

“Someone should go over and stay with Mom,” Lexie said, but no one moved.

After a minute, Trip said, “When Mom and Dad find Iz, they are going to lock her up in a psych ward for the rest of her life.”

No one thought about the recent departure of Mia and Pearl from the house on Winslow Road. Mrs. Richardson, watching the fire chief meticulously taking notes on his clipboard, had completely forgotten about her former tenants. She had not yet mentioned it to her husband or her children; Moody had discovered their absence only earlier that morning, and was still unsure what to make of it. Far down Parkland Drive the small blue dot of their father’s BMW began to approach.

“What makes you so sure they’ll find her?” Moody asked.

The previous June, when Mia and Pearl had moved into the little rental house on Winslow Road, neither Mrs. Richardson (who technically owned the house) nor Mr. Richardson (who handed over the keys) had given them much thought. They knew there was no Mr. Warren, and that Mia was thirty-six, according to the Michigan driver's license she had provided. They noticed that she wore no ring on her left hand, though she wore plenty of other rings: a big amethyst on her first finger, one made from a silver spoon handle on her pinkie, and one on her thumb that to Mrs. Richardson looked suspiciously like a mood ring. But she seemed nice enough, and so did her daughter, Pearl, a quiet fifteen-year-old with a long dark braid. Mia paid the first and last months' rent, and the deposit, in a stack of twenty-dollar bills, and the tan VW Rabbit—already battered, even then—pattered away down Parkland Drive, toward the south end of Shaker, where the houses were closer together and the yards smaller.

Winslow Road was one long line of duplexes, but standing on the curb you would not have known it. From the outside you saw only one front door, one front-door light, one mailbox, one house number. You might, perhaps, spot the two electrical meters, but those—per city ordinance—were concealed at the back of the house, along with the garage. Only if you came into the entryway would you see the two inner doors, one leading to the upstairs apartment, one to the downstairs, and their shared basement beneath. Every house on Winslow Road held two families, but outside appeared to hold only one. They had been designed that way on purpose. It allowed residents to avoid the stigma of living in a duplex house—of renting, instead of owning—and allowed the city planners to preserve the appearance of the street, as everyone knew neighborhoods with rentals were less desirable.

Shaker Heights was like that. There were rules, many rules, about what you could and could not do, as Mia and Pearl began to learn as they settled into their new home. They learned to write their new address: 18434 Winslow Road *Up*, those two little letters ensuring

that their mail ended up in their apartment, and not with Mr. Yang downstairs. They learned that the little strip of grass between sidewalk and street was called a *tree lawn*—because of the young Norway maple, one per house, that graced it—and that garbage cans were not dragged there on Friday mornings but instead left at the rear of the house, to avoid the unsightly spectacle of trash cans cluttering the curb. Large motor scooters, each piloted by a man in an orange work suit, zipped down each driveway to collect the garbage in the privacy of the backyard, ferrying it to the larger truck idling out in the street, and for months Mia would remember their first Friday on Winslow Road, the fright she'd had when the scooter, like a revved-up flame-colored golf cart, shot past the kitchen window with engine roaring. They got used to it eventually, just as they got used to the detached garage—stationed well at the back of the house, again to preserve the view of the street—and learned to carry an umbrella to keep them dry as they ran from car to house on rainy days. Later, when Mr. Yang went away for two weeks in July, to visit his mother in Hong Kong, they learned that an unmowed lawn would result in a polite but stern letter from the city, noting that their grass was over six inches tall and that if the situation was not rectified, the city would mow the grass—and charge them a hundred dollars—in three days. There were many rules to be learned.

And there were many other rules that Mia and Pearl would not be aware of for a long time. The rules governing what colors a house could be painted, for example. A helpful chart from the city categorized every home as a Tudor, English, or French style and laid out the appropriate colors for architects and homeowners alike. “English-style” houses could be painted only slate blue, moss green, or a certain shade of tan, to ensure aesthetic harmony on each street; Tudor houses required a specific shade of cream on the plaster and a specific dark brown on the timbers. In Shaker Heights there was a plan for everything. When the city had been laid out in 1912—one of the first planned communities in the nation—schools had been situated so that all children could walk without crossing a major street; side streets fed into major boulevards, with strategically placed rapid-transit stops to ferry commuters into downtown Cleveland. In fact, the city's motto was—*literally*, as Lexie would have said—“Most communities just happen; the best are planned”: the underlying philosophy being that everything could—and should—be planned out, and that by doing so you could avoid the unseemly, the unpleasant, and the disastrous.

But there were other, more welcoming things to discover in those first few weeks as well. Between cleaning and repainting and unpacking, they learned the names of the streets around them: Winchell, Latimore, Lynnfield. They learned their way around the local grocery store, Heinen's, which Mia said treated you like aristocracy. Instead of wheeling your cart out to the parking lot, a cart boy in a pressed poplin shirt hung a number on it and handed you a matching red-and-white tag. Then you hooked the tag on the window of your car and drove up to the front of the store, where another cart boy would wheel your groceries out to you and pack them tidily into your trunk and refuse to accept a tip.

They learned where the cheapest gas station was—at the corner of Lomond and Lee Roads, always one cent less than anywhere else; where the drugstores were and which gave double coupons. They learned that in nearby Cleveland Heights and Warrensville and Beachwood, residents placed their discarded belongings at the curb like ordinary people, and they learned which days were garbage days on which streets. They learned where to buy a hammer, a screwdriver, a quart of new paint and a brush: all could be found at Shaker Hardware, but only between the hours of nine thirty and six P.M., when the owner sent his employees home for dinner.

And, for Pearl, there was the discovery of their landlords, and of the Richardson children.

Moody was the first of the Richardsons to venture to the little house on Winslow. He had heard his mother describing their new tenants to his father. "She's some kind of artist," Mrs. Richardson had said, and when Mr. Richardson asked what kind, she answered jokingly, "A struggling one."

"It's all right," she reassured her husband. "She gave me a deposit right up front." "That doesn't mean she'll pay the rent," Mr. Richardson said, but they both knew it wasn't the rent that was important—only three hundred dollars a month for the upstairs—and they certainly didn't need it to get by. Mr. Richardson was a defense attorney and Mrs. Richardson worked for the local paper, the *Sun Press*. The Winslow house was theirs free and clear; Mrs. Richardson's parents had bought it as an investment property when she was a teenager. Its rent had helped put her through Denison, then had become a monthly "booster"—as her mother had put it—while she started off as a cub reporter. Then, after she'd married Bill Richardson and become Mrs. Richardson, it had helped make up the down payment on a beautiful Shaker house of their own, the same house on Parkland that she would later watch burn. When Mrs.

Richardson's parents had died, five years ago and within months of each other, she had inherited the Winslow house. Her parents had been in an assisted-living home for some time by then, and the house she had grown up in had already been sold. But they had kept the Winslow house, its rent paying for their care, and now Mrs. Richardson kept it, too, as a sentimental memory.

No, it wasn't the money that mattered. The rent—all five hundred dollars of it in total—now went into the Richardsons' vacation fund each month, and last year it had paid for their trip to Martha's Vineyard, where Lexie had perfected her backstroke and Trip had bewitched all the local girls and Moody had sunburnt to a peeling crisp and Izzy, under great duress, had finally agreed to come down to the beach—fully clothed, in her Doc Martens, and glowering. But the truth was, there was plenty of money for a vacation even without it. Because they did not *need* the money from the house, it was the *kind* of tenant that mattered to Mrs. Richardson. She wanted to feel that she was doing good with it. Her parents had brought her up to do good; they had donated every year to the Humane Society and UNICEF and always attended local fund-raisers, once winning a three-foot-tall stuffed bear at the Rotary Club's silent auction. Mrs. Richardson looked at the house as a form of charity. She kept the rent low—real estate in Cleveland was cheap, but apartments in good neighborhoods like Shaker could be pricey—and she rented only to people she felt were deserving but who had, for one reason or another, not quite gotten a fair shot in life. It pleased her to make up the difference.

Mr. Yang had been the first tenant she'd taken after inheriting the house; he was an immigrant from Hong Kong who had come to the United States knowing no one and speaking only fragmentary, heavily accented English. Over the years his accent had diminished only marginally, and when they spoke, Mrs. Richardson was sometimes reduced to nodding and smiling. But Mr. Yang was a good man, she felt; he worked very hard, driving a school bus to Laurel Academy, a nearby private girls' school, and working as a handyman. Living alone on such a meager income, he would never have been able to live in such a nice neighborhood. He would have ended up in a cramped, gray efficiency somewhere off Buckeye Road, or more likely in the gritty triangle of east Cleveland that passed for a Chinatown, where rent was suspiciously low, every other building was abandoned, and sirens wailed at least once a night. Plus, Mr. Yang kept the house in impeccable shape, repairing leaky faucets, patching the front concrete, and coaxing the stamp-sized backyard

into a lush garden. Every summer he brought her Chinese melons he had grown, like a tithe, and although Mrs. Richardson had no idea what to do with them—they were jade green, wrinkled, and disconcertingly fuzzy—she appreciated his thoughtfulness anyway. Mr. Yang was exactly the kind of tenant Mrs. Richardson wanted: a kind person to whom she could do a kind turn, and who would appreciate her kindness.

With the upstairs apartment she had been less successful. The upstairs had had a new tenant every year or so: a cellist who had just been hired to teach at the Institute of Music; a divorcée in her forties; a young newlywed couple fresh out of Cleveland State. Each of them had deserved a little booster, as she'd begun to think of it. But none of them stayed long. The cellist, denied first chair in the Cleveland Orchestra, left the city in a cloud of bitterness. The divorcée remarried after a whirlwind four-month romance and moved with her new husband to a brand-new McMansion in Lakewood. And the young couple, who had seemed so sincere, so devoted, and so deeply in love, had quarreled irreparably and separated after a mere eighteen months, leaving a broken lease, some shattered vases, and three cracked spots in the wall, head-high, where those vases had shattered.

It was a lesson, Mrs. Richardson had decided. This time she would be more careful. She asked Mr. Yang to patch the plaster and took her time finding a new tenant, the right sort of tenant. 18434 Winslow Road *Up* sat empty for nearly six months until Mia Warren and her daughter came along. A single mother, well spoken, artistic, raising a daughter who was polite and fairly pretty and possibly brilliant.

“I heard Shaker schools are the best in Cleveland,” Mia had said when Mrs. Richardson asked why they'd come to Shaker. “Pearl is working at the college level already. But I can't afford private school.” She glanced over at Pearl, who stood quietly in the empty living room of the apartment, hands clasped in front of her, and the girl smiled shyly. Something about that look between mother and child caught Mrs. Richardson's heart in a butterfly net. She assured Mia that yes, Shaker schools were excellent—Pearl could enroll in AP classes in every subject; there were science labs, a planetarium, five languages she could learn.

“There's a wonderful theatre program, if she's interested in that,” she added. “My daughter Lexie was Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* last year.” She quoted the Shaker schools' motto: *A community is known by the schools it keeps*. Real estate taxes in Shaker were higher than anywhere else, but residents certainly got

their money's worth. "But you'll be renting, so of course you get all the benefits with none of the burden," she added with a laugh. She handed Mia an application, but she'd already decided. It gave her immense satisfaction to imagine this woman and her daughter settling into the apartment, Pearl doing her homework at the kitchen table, Mia perhaps working on a painting or a sculpture—for she had not mentioned her exact medium—in the enclosed porch overlooking the backyard.

Moody, listening to his mother describe their new tenants, was intrigued less by the artist than by the mention of the "brilliant" daughter just his age. A few days after Mia and Pearl moved in, his curiosity got the better of him. As always, he took his bike, an old fixed-gear Schwinn that had belonged to his father long ago in Indiana. Nobody biked in Shaker Heights, just as nobody took the bus: you either drove or somebody drove you; it was a town built for cars and for people who had cars. Moody biked. He wouldn't be sixteen until spring, and he never asked Lexie or Trip to drive him anywhere if he could help it.

He pushed off and followed the curve of Parkland Drive, past the duck pond, where he had never seen a duck in his life, only swarms of big, brash Canadian geese; across Van Aken Boulevard and the rapid-transit tracks to Winslow Road. He didn't come here often—none of the children had much to do with the rental house—but he knew where it was. A few times, when he was younger, he had sat in the idling car in the driveway, staring at the peach tree in the yard and skimming the radio stations while his mother ran in to drop something off or check on something. It didn't happen often; for the most part, except when his mother was looking for tenants, the house mostly ran itself. Now he realized, as his wheels bumped over the joints between the big sandstone slabs that made up the sidewalks, that he had never been inside. He wasn't sure any of the kids ever had.

In front of the house, Pearl was carefully arranging the pieces of a wooden bed on the front lawn. Moody, gliding to a stop across the street, saw a slender girl in a long, crinkly skirt and a loose T-shirt with a message he couldn't quite read. Her hair was long and curly and hung in a thick braid down her back and gave the impression of straining to burst free. She had laid the headboard down flat near the flowerbeds that bordered the house, with the side rails below it and the slats to either side in neat rows, like ribs. It was as if the bed had drawn a deep breath and then gracefully flattened itself into the grass. Moody watched, half hidden by a tree, as she picked her way

around to the Rabbit, which sat in the driveway with its doors thrown wide, and extracted the footboard from the backseat. He wondered what kind of Tetris they had done to fit all the pieces of the bed into such a small car. Her feet were bare as she crossed the lawn to set the footboard into place. Then, to his bemusement, she stepped into the empty rectangle in the center, where the mattress belonged, and flopped down on her back.

On the second story of the house, a window rattled open and Mia's head peered out. "All there?"

"Two slats missing," Pearl called back.

"We'll replace them. No, wait, stay there. Don't move." Mia's head disappeared again. In a moment she reappeared holding a camera, a real camera, with a thick lens like a big tin can. Pearl stayed just as she was, staring up at the half-clouded sky, and Mia leaned out almost to the waist, angling for the right shot. Moody held his breath, afraid the camera might slip from her hands onto her daughter's trusting upturned face, that she might tumble over the sill herself and come crashing down into the grass. None of this happened. Mia's head tilted this way and that, framing the scene below in her viewfinder. The camera hid her face, hid everything but her hair, piled in a frizzy swirl atop her head like a dark halo. Later, when Moody saw the finished photos, he thought at first that Pearl looked like a delicate fossil, something caught for millennia in the skeleton belly of a prehistoric beast. Then he thought she looked like an angel resting with her wings spread out behind her. And then, after a moment, she looked simply like a girl asleep in a lush green bed, waiting for her lover to lie down beside her.

"All right," Mia called down. "Got it." She slid back inside, and Pearl sat up and looked across the street, directly at Moody, and his heart jumped.

"You want to help?" she said. "Or just stand there?"

Moody would never remember crossing the street, or propping his bike in the front walkway, or introducing himself. So it would feel to him that he had always known her name, and that she had always known his, that somehow, he and Pearl had known each other always.

Together they ferried the pieces of the bed frame up the narrow stairway. The living room was empty except for a stack of boxes in one corner and a large red cushion in the center of the floor.

"This way." Pearl tugged her armful of bed slats higher and led Moody into the larger bedroom, which held nothing except a faded but clean twin mattress leaning against one wall.

“Here,” said Mia, depositing a steel toolbox at Pearl’s feet. “You’ll want these.” She gave Moody a smile, as if he were an old friend. “Call me if you need another set of hands.” Then she stepped back into the hallway, and in a moment they heard the snick of a box being slit open.

Pearl wielded the tools with expert hands, levering the side panels into place against the headboard, propping them up on one ankle while she bolted them into place. Moody sat beside the open toolbox and watched her with unfolding awe. In his house, if something broke, his mother called a repairman to fix it—the stove, the washer, the disposal—or, for almost anything else, it was discarded and replaced. Every three or four years, or when the springs began to sag, his mother picked a new living room set, the old set moved into the basement rec room, and the old-old set from the rec room was given away to the juvenile boys’ home on the West Side, or to the women’s shelter downtown. His father did not tinker with the car in the garage; when it rattled or squealed he brought it to the Lusty Wrench, where Luther had tended to every car the Richardsons had owned for the past twenty years. The only time he himself had handled any tools, Moody realized, was in eighth-grade shop: they’d been put in groups, one team measuring and one sawing and one sanding, and at the end of the term everyone dutifully screwed their pieces together to make a little box-shaped candy dispenser that gave you three Skittles every time you pulled the handle. Trip had made an identical one in shop the year before and Lexie had made an identical one the year before that and Izzy made yet another the following year, and despite the whole term of shop, despite the four identical candy dispensers stashed somewhere in their house, Moody was not sure that anyone in the Richardson household could do more than work a Phillips screwdriver.

“How’d you learn to do all that?” he asked, handing Pearl another bed slat.

Pearl shrugged. “From my mom,” she said, pinning the slat in place with one hand and plucking a screw from the pile on the carpet.

The bed, when assembled, proved to be an old-fashioned twin with bed knobs, the kind Goldilocks might have slept in.

“Where’d you get it?” Moody set the mattress in place and gave it an experimental bounce.

Pearl replaced the screwdriver in the toolbox and latched it shut. “We found it.”

She sat down on the bed, back propped against the footboard, legs stretched along the bed’s length, gazing up at the ceiling, as if testing

it out. Moody sat down at the head of the bed, near her feet. Wisps of grass stuck to her toes and her calves and the hem of her skirt. She smelled like fresh air and mint shampoo.

“This is *my room*,” Pearl said suddenly, and Moody sprang up again. “Sorry,” he said, a hot flush rising to his cheeks.

Pearl glanced up, as if for a moment she’d forgotten he was there. “Oh,” she said. “That’s not what I meant.” She picked a sliver of grass from between her toes and flicked it away and they watched it settle on the carpet. When she began again, her tone was one of wonder. “I’ve never had my own room before.”

Moody turned her words over in his mind. “You mean you always had to share?” He tried to imagine a world where this was possible. He tried to imagine sharing a room with Trip, who littered the floor with dirty socks and sports magazines, whose first action when he came home was to snap the radio on—always to “Jammin” 92.3—as if without that inane bass thumping, his heart might not beat. On vacation, the Richardsons always booked three rooms: one for Mr. and Mrs. Richardson, one for Lexie and Izzy, one for Trip and Moody—and at breakfast Trip would make fun of Moody for sometimes talking in his sleep. For Pearl and her mother to have had to share a room—Moody almost could not believe that people could be so poor.

Pearl shook her head. “We’ve never had a house of our own before,” she said, and Moody stifled the urge to tell her that this wasn’t a house, it was only half a house. She traced the dips of the mattress with her fingertip, circling the buttons in each dimple.

Watching her, Moody could not see all that she was remembering: the finicky stove in Urbana, which they’d had to light with a match; the fifth-floor walk-up in Middlebury and the weed-choked garden in Ocala and the smoky apartment in Muncie, where the previous tenant had let his pet rabbit roam the living room, leaving gnawed-in holes and several questionable stains. And the sublet in Ann Arbor, years ago now, that she’d most hated to leave, because the people who’d lived there had had a daughter just a year or two older than she was, and every day of the six months she and her mother had lived there she had played with that lucky girl’s collection of horse figurines and sat in her child-sized armchair and lain in her white-frosted canopy bed to sleep, and sometimes, in the middle of the night when her mother was asleep, she would turn on the bedside light and open that girl’s closet and try on her dresses and her shoes, even though they were all a little too big. There had been photos of that girl everywhere in the house—on the mantel, on the end tables in the living room, in the stairwell a big, beautiful studio portrait of her

with chin in hand—and it had been so easy for Pearl to pretend that this was her house and that these were her things, her room, her life. When the couple and their daughter had returned from their sabbatical, Pearl had not even been able to look at the girl, tanned and wiry and too tall now for those dresses in the closet. She had cried all the way to Lafayette, where they would stay for the next eight months, and even the prancing china palomino she had stolen from the girl's collection gave her no comfort, for though she waited nervously, there was never any complaint about the loss, and what could be less satisfying than stealing from someone so endowed that they never even noticed what you'd taken? Her mother must have understood, for they didn't sulk again. Pearl hadn't complained either, knowing now that she preferred an empty apartment to one filled with someone else's things.

“We move around a lot. Whenever my mom gets the bug.” She looked at him fiercely, almost a glare, and Moody saw that her eyes, which he'd thought were hazel, were a deep jade green. At that moment Moody had a sudden clear understanding of what had already happened that morning: his life had been divided into a before and an after, and he would always be comparing the two.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked.