

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



# Everything I Never

# Told

A NOVEL






# You

# Celeste Ng



“If we know this story, we haven’t seen it yet in American fiction, not until now . . . a deep, heartfelt portrait of a family.”

—ALEXANDER CHEE,  
*The New York Times Book Review*

celesteng.com  celestengwriter  @pronounced\_ing  
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# HELLO READERS

Thank you for choosing *Everything I Never Told You* for your book club!

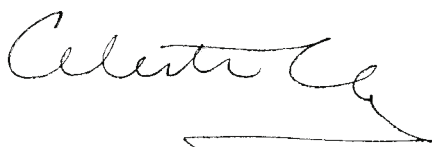
*Everything I Never Told You* is the story of the Lees, a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. Marilyn and James are determined that Lydia, the middle and favorite child, will fulfill the dreams they were unable to pursue: for Marilyn, that her daughter becomes a doctor; for James, that Lydia is popular at school, a girl with a busy social life and the center of every party.

When Lydia's body is found in the local lake, the delicate balancing act that has been keeping the Lee family together is destroyed. James, consumed by guilt, sets out on a reckless path that may destroy his marriage. Marilyn, devastated and vengeful, is determined to find a responsible party, no matter what the cost. Lydia's older brother, Nathan, is certain that the neighborhood bad boy, Jack, is somehow involved. But it's the youngest of the family—Hannah—who observes far more than anyone realizes and who may be the only one who knows the truth about what happened.

Although the novel takes place in the 1970s, many of the issues the characters face are just as relevant today. Those who are different—racially, culturally, or in any other way—still find themselves pressured to be someone they're not. Many more routes are open to women today, especially in medicine and science, but women still wrestle to balance careers and personal lives, trying to align what their families need and what they themselves want—as well as society's expectations of what women, wives, and mothers should be. And, of course, parents yearn to make a better life for their children while the children themselves often feel defined (and confined) by their parents' dreams.

In writing *Everything I Never Told You*, I was surprised to remember how different things were just a generation or two ago—and how much they've stayed the same. Why do we keep secrets, even from those we love most? How well do we ever really know each other? What do we expect of our children, and of our parents? And what holds families together, even in the face of unthinkable tragedies?

I hope you enjoy the novel, and I hope it sparks lots of interesting discussion for your group!



Celeste Ng



**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER**

**WINNER OF THE  
ALEX AWARD**

**A NEW YORK TIMES  
BOOK REVIEW NOTABLE  
BOOK OF THE YEAR**

**AMAZON'S #1 BEST  
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*NPR, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, HUFFINGTON POST, BUZZFEED, GRANTLAND, BOOKLIST, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, SHELF AWARENESS, BOOK RIOT, SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, BUSTLE, TIME OUT NEW YORK*

“If we know this story, we haven’t seen it yet in American fiction, not until now... Ng has set two tasks in this novel’s doubled heart—to be exciting, and to tell a story bigger than whatever is behind the crime. She does both by turning the nest of familial resentments into at least four smaller, prickly mysteries full of secrets the family members won’t share... What emerges is a deep, heartfelt portrait of a family struggling with its place in history, and a young woman hoping to be the fulfillment of that struggle. This is, in the end, a novel about the burden of being the first of your kind—a burden you do not always survive.” —**Alexander Chee, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**

“An accomplished debut... It’s also heart-wrenching... Ng deftly pulls together the strands of this complex, multigenerational novel. Everything I Never Told You is an engaging work that casts a powerful light on the secrets that have kept an American family together — and that finally end up tearing it apart.” —**LOS ANGELES TIMES**

“Both a propulsive mystery and a profound examination of a mixed-race family...[an] explosive debut.”  
—**ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY**

“Cleverly crafted, emotionally perceptive... Ng sensitively dramatizes issues of gender and race that lie at the heart of the story... Ng’s themes of assimilation are themselves deftly interlaced into a taut tale of ever deepening and quickening suspense.” —**O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE**

“Wonderfully moving...Emotionally precise...A beautifully crafted study of dysfunction and grief... [The book] will resonate with anyone who has ever had a family drama.” —**BOSTON GLOBE**

“A powerhouse of a debut novel, a literary mystery crafted out of shimmering prose and precise, painful observation about racial barriers, the burden of familial expectations, and the basic human thirst for belonging... Ng’s novel grips readers from page one with the hope of unraveling the mystery behind Lydia’s death—and boy does it deliver, on every front.” —**HUFFINGTON POST**

# Q&A WITH CELESTE NG



## **What compelled you to write this book?**

My stories almost always begin with images—in this case, the image of a young girl falling into deep water. I started writing to figure out how she got there: Was she pushed? Did she slip? Did she jump? As I wrote my way into the book, I discovered it was a story about not just the girl but about her family, her family's history, and everything in her life that had led her to this point—and about whether (and how) her family would be able to go on. What seemed like the end of the story actually turned out to be the center.

## **The discovery of Lydia's death spurs so many questions for her family. How did you approach writing about loss and grief?**

When you lose someone you love, especially suddenly, there's immense regret and immense self-doubt. It's impossible not to ask yourself questions: Could you have saved them in some way? Could you, by leaving five minutes later or arriving a day earlier or saying just the right words, have changed what happened? Inevitably, you reconsider and reassess the relationship you had with that person, and it can be hardest if that relationship was strained. James, Marilyn, Nath, and Hannah each feel a lot of guilt about their relationships with Lydia—and the ways that, deep down, they know they've pressured, disappointed, or failed her—and that complicates their reactions to her death. Any act of writing is an act of empathy: You try to imagine yourself into another person's mind and skin. I tried to ask myself the questions the characters would have asked themselves.

## **The relationships between the siblings—Nath, Lydia, and Hannah—are immediately recognizable and so well drawn. They love one another, but they also get angry, jealous, and confused and take it out on one another. Can you speak to their dynamics? Did you draw on your own childhood?**

Sibling relationships are fascinating: You have the same parents and grow up alongside each other, yet more often than not, siblings are incredibly different from one another and have incredibly different experiences even within the same family. You share so much that you feel you should understand one another completely, yet of course there's also enough distance between you that that's almost never the case. It gets even more complicated when one sibling is clearly the favorite in the family. The family constellation can get really skewed when one star shines much brighter than the rest.

My own sister is eleven years older than I am. Because she was so much older, we never really fought; I actually think our relationship was stronger because we weren't close in age. At the same time, though, I missed her terribly when I was seven and she went off to college—that informed Lydia's feelings of abandonment when Nath heads to Harvard. And I always idolized my sister; there's definitely an aspect of that in Hannah's relationship with Lydia.

**You began writing the book before you had your son. How did becoming a parent affect your approach to your characters and their stories, especially James and Marilyn?**

Even before I had children, I often found myself focusing on parents and children in my fiction. Your relationship with your parents is maybe the most fundamental and the most powerful, even more than friendship or romantic love. It's the first relationship you ever have, and it's probably the greatest single influence on your outlook and the kind of person you become. Most of us spend our lives either trying to live up to our parents' ideals or actively rebelling against them.

When I started writing the novel—having never been a parent—I definitely identified more with the children, especially Lydia. After my son was born, though, I became much more sympathetic to Marilyn and James. I started to understand how deeply parents want the best for their children and how that desire can sometimes blind you to what actually is best. This isn't to say that I “switched sides,” only that becoming a parent made my perspective more balanced, I think, and made the book more nuanced. Now I identify with the parents at least as much as I identify with the children.

**The book is set in Ohio in the 1970s. You grew up in Pennsylvania and Ohio—how did your time there inform the book?**

Both of the small suburbs I grew up in—first outside Pittsburgh, then outside Cleveland—had a small-town feel. My first elementary school was tiny, one of those schools where the gym is also the cafeteria and the auditorium, and on my street the neighbor kids all played together. But more than that, I remember a distinct sense of restlessness in the air while I was growing up, a feeling that if you wanted an exciting or important or interesting life, you needed to escape. Pittsburgh in the 1980s and Cleveland in the early 1990s were depressed and depressing places: a lot of closed factories, a lot of tension and unemployment, a lot of rust. So I knew the kind of insulated, almost suffocated feeling teenagers like Nath and Lydia—and even adults like James and Marilyn—might have, the feeling that the place you're in is too small.

**Through all members of the Lee family, you write touchingly and perceptively about feeling like an outsider and being measured against stereotypes and others' perceptions. Can you discuss your personal experience and how you approached these themes in the book?**

My parents came to the U.S. from Hong Kong and moved straight into the Midwest: Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio. Most of the time I was growing up, we were virtually the only Asians in the community. In my school in Pittsburgh, for instance, I was one of two nonwhite girls, and the only Asian, in all four grades. Like most Asian Americans, my family experienced some outright discrimination: Once, neighborhood kids put cherry bombs in our mailbox; another time, a man got in our faces while we were waiting at a bus stop, spitting at us and telling us, “Go back to Vietnam or Korea or wherever the hell you came from.”

More insidious than those moments of outright hostility, though, and maybe more powerful are the constant low-level reminders that you're different. Many of us feel different in some way, but it's really jarring when one of your differences is obvious at a glance—other people can tell you're different simply by looking at you. (It's hard to explain just how strange that is if you've never experienced it. My husband and I had talked about it many times, but he didn't really know what it felt like until we went to Hong Kong and he—a very tall white man—was surrounded by thousands of Asians.) Even when you feel like you belong, other people's reactions—even stares and offhand remarks—can make

you feel that you don't, startlingly often. I drew on that to imagine the experiences of James, Lydia, Nath, and Hannah, or at least their reactions to those experiences. In terms of actual encounters, I didn't have to imagine much: They all came from life, from the girls who throw rocks at James's car, to the people who speak to you slower and louder as if you might not understand English, to the woman in the grocery store who proudly identifies the children as Chinese before pulling her eyes into slits.

In the novel, though, I didn't want to explore just racial difference. There are all kinds of ways of feeling like an outsider. For example, my mother is a chemist and my sister is a scientist—both women in heavily male-dominated fields—and I often feel like an outsider or an impostor myself: Am I smart enough/experienced enough/insert-adjective-here enough? All of the characters grapple with some version of that feeling.

**Marilyn is deeply conflicted about being a homemaker and wanting to finish her degree and achieving more in her professional life. What did you seek to explore through her desires and decisions?**

This is a long-standing question that most women face: How do you balance a family and a professional life of your own? I struggle with this myself, as does every other woman I know, and Marilyn's situation is a magnified version. It's striking to remember that in her time—just a generation ago—she had so many fewer paths open to her. But even with more options, we haven't gotten this figured out yet, either. We're still actively wrestling with the question of balance and women's roles. Look at the tremendous interest in *Lean In* and the uproar over Anne-Marie Slaughter's essay in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." Recently a Princeton alumna wrote an essay telling young female grads that the most important thing to do in college was to find a husband. Many women were outraged—but she's also just published a book. The debate over what women can and should do goes on.

**You grew up in a family of scientists. What compelled you to become a writer? How did that shape how you approach writing?**

I was always interested in stories—reading them, making them up, telling them to my parents and friends. There's an argument for nature over nurture right there! But actually, there's more overlap between science and writing than you'd expect. Scientists are really interested in figuring out how the world works and why things happen the way they do. A science experiment is really a what-if: "Hmm, what if I put these things together under these conditions?" I do the same thing in my writing, only I do it with people on the page: "What if this family was in this situation?"

**What does the title *Everything I Never Told You* mean to you?**

The title is actually an echo of one of the last lines of the book. *Everything I Never Told You* refers, on the one hand, to the secrets that the members of the Lee family keep from one another—all the things they lock inside because they're afraid to say them or they're ashamed to say them. But it also refers to all the things they don't say by accident, so to speak—the things they forget to say because they don't seem important. After Lydia's death, each member of her family thinks back to the last time they saw her and what they'd have said if they knew it was the last time. The things that go unsaid are often the things that eat at you—whether because you didn't get to have your say or because the other person never got to hear you and really wanted to.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the relationships between Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. How do the siblings both understand and mystify one another?
2. Why do you think Lydia is the favorite child of James and Marilyn? How does this pressure affect Lydia, and what kind of impact do you think it has on Nath and Hannah? Do you think it is more difficult for Lydia to be the favorite, or for Nath and Hannah, who are often overlooked by their parents?
3. “So part of him wanted to tell Nath that he knew: what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. The other part of him wanted to shake his son, to slap him. To shape him into something different. . . . When Marilyn asked what happened, James said merely, with a wave of the hand, ‘Some kids teased him at the pool yesterday. He needs to learn to take a joke.’”  
  
How did you react to the “Marco Polo” pool scene with James and Nath? What do you think of James’s decision?
4. Discuss a situation in which you’ve felt like an outsider. How do the members of the Lee family deal with being measured against stereotypes and others’ perceptions?
5. What is the meaning of the novel’s title? To whom do the “I” and “you” refer?
6. What would have happened if Lydia had reached the dock? Do you think she would have been able to change her parents’ views and expectations of her?
7. This novel says a great deal about the influence our parents can have on us. Do you think the same issues will affect the next generation of Lees? How did your parents influence your childhood?
8. “It struck her then, as if someone had said it aloud: her mother was dead, and the only thing worth remembering about her, in the end, was that she cooked. Marilyn thought uneasily of her own life, of hours spent making breakfasts, serving dinners, packing lunches into neat paper bags.”  
  
Discuss the relationship Marilyn and her mother have to cooking and their roles as stay-at-home mothers. Do you think one is happier or more satisfied?
9. The footprint on the ceiling brings Nath and Lydia closer when they are young, and later, Hannah and James discover it together and laugh. What other objects bring the characters closer together or drive them further apart?
10. There’s so much that the characters keep to themselves. What do you wish they had shared with one another? Do you think an ability to better express themselves would have changed the outcome of the book?

# RECOMMENDED READING LIST

## **Fiction on families, love, and loss**

*Amy and Isabelle* by Elizabeth Strout: One of the most potent explorations I've read of mother-daughter relationships and the effects long-held secrets can have on a family.

*The Love Wife* by Gish Jen: A masterful portrait of a contemporary mixed family and the shifting identities, loyalties, and fault lines between its members.

*A Friend of the Family* by Lauren Grodstein: When his son falls for a woman with a shocking past, a devoted father sets out to derail the relationship—raising the question of how far we'll go to protect our children and our hopes for them.

*The Dogs of Babel* by Carolyn Parkhurst: A haunting story about a man determined to understand whether his wife's death was accident or suicide—but at what emotional cost?

*The Family Fang* by Kevin Wilson: Simultaneously hilarious and heartbreaking, this novel follows the members of a family of famous performance artists as the children try to create their own lives in the shadow of their parents' influence.

## **Nonfiction**

*Part Asian, 100% Hapa* by Kip Fulbeck: Based on "The Hapa Project," these photos of part-Asian people of all ages—and their answers to the question "What are you?"—are beautiful and thought-provoking.

*The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* by Iris Chang: A highly readable history for those interested in learning more about the history of Chinese Americans.



# VINTAGE RECIPE

*Adapted from my mom's original Betty Crocker Cookbook. I did actually make these as a child—how could I not want to? They're a bit kitschy and very 1960s/70s, but still delicious (unlike, say, aspic). And the space-related theme makes me think of Nath. —Celeste*

## *Galaxy Cookies*

½ cup butter or margarine, softened  
¾ cup confectioners' sugar  
1 tablespoon vanilla  
Food coloring, if desired  
1½ cups all-purpose flour  
⅛ teaspoon salt  
Dates, nuts, coconut, semisweet chocolate pieces, and candied or maraschino cherries

## *Icing*

1 cup confectioners' sugar  
2½ tablespoons light cream  
or 1½ tablespoons milk  
1 teaspoon vanilla

Heat the oven to 350°F. Mix thoroughly the butter, sugar, vanilla, and a few drops of food coloring. Work in the flour and salt until the dough holds together. (If the dough is dry, mix in 1 to 2 tablespoons light cream.)

Mold the dough by tablespoonfuls around date, nut, cherry, or a few chocolate pieces. Roll into balls and place the cookies about 1 inch apart on an ungreased baking sheet. Bake 12 to 15 minutes or until set but not brown.

Cool; dip the tops of the cookies into the icing. If desired, decorate with coconut, nuts, colored sugar, candies, chocolate pieces, or chocolate shot.

Makes 20 to 25 cookies.

To prepare the icing, mix the confectioners' sugar, light cream, and vanilla until smooth. If desired, stir in a few drops of food coloring.

For a chocolate icing, increase the light cream to 3 tablespoons (or milk to 2 tablespoons) and stir in 1 ounce of melted unsweetened chocolate.

## VARIATIONS

- *Brown Sugar Galaxy Cookies:* Substitute ½ cup brown sugar (packed) for the confectioners' sugar and omit the food coloring.
- *Chocolate Galaxy Cookies:* Omit the food coloring and stir 1 ounce of melted unsweetened chocolate into the butter mixture.

# PLAYLIST

*I love a good soundtrack and the synergy that occurs when the right song and the right moment coincide. In putting together this playlist, I tried to stick to songs of the period of the book—songs that the characters themselves might have heard on their radios or their record players and that might have meant something to them. —Celeste*

## **“Lay Lady Lay,” Bob Dylan (1969)**

Bob Dylan doesn't sound like Bob Dylan on this track: He sings in a deep warm croon, so different from his more typical abrasive, almost accusatory tone. (Let this not be interpreted as a criticism; I have a huge historical crush on the Bob Dylan of the early- to mid-60s.) It's almost as if longing and anticipation have physically transformed Dylan's voice, revealing a hidden, softer, vulnerable side that we've never heard before. To me this song expresses what James and Marilyn must have felt as they fell in love in James's tiny apartment as students and the transformation that kind of love can bring.

## **“Thirteen,” Big Star (1972)**

So perfectly encapsulates the restless, aching intensity of adolescence. The jump from “Won't you let me walk you home from school?” to “Would you be an outlaw for my love?” throws you right into that teenage perspective—or rather, complete lack thereof. All of these things feel equally crucial, and meeting someone at the pool can be as monumental as running away with them forever. And that deceptively simple, almost plinking guitar, laced through with melancholy—it's just gorgeous. Listening to this song makes me feel thirteen all over again.

## **“You've Got to Hide Your Love Away,” The Beatles (1965)**

Every character in *Everything I Never Told You* is keeping a secret of some kind, and this is a song about inside versus outside, about the difference between what people see and what you feel—and perhaps hide. I love that the disconnect between the light, bouncy tune and the deep sadness of the lyrics actually illustrates that division. It's a song that asks you to look beyond the surface.

## **“Alison,” Elvis Costello (1977)**

Elvis Costello has said little about the meaning of this song—to his credit, I think. I read it as a song about watching someone self-destruct, and that feeling of helplessness—“I know this world is killing you”—makes me think of both Lydia and Nath.

## **“The Only Living Boy in New York,” Simon & Garfunkel (1970)**

There isn't much music mentioned explicitly in the book, but this song is. Hannah gives Lydia a Simon & Garfunkel album for Christmas, and Lydia finds herself playing this song over and over. It's one of my personal favorites as well, a track that just breaks my heart every time. I can't think of another song that better conveys the feeling of being left behind by someone you love.

### **“Both Sides Now,” Joni Mitchell (1969)**

“Both Sides Now” is about realizing how much you don’t know, about realizing that the things you thought you knew inside and out are actually totally foreign—something every one of the characters in *Everything I Never Told You* comes to recognize. Speaking of seeing things in a new light as you get older, Joni Mitchell re-recorded this song in 2000: same tune and words, but such a different tone and voice that it’s virtually a different song. It’s one of the few cases where I like the cover as much as the original, but I’ve given the 1969 version the edge here as a song the characters might have listened to themselves.

### **“Wild Horses,” Rolling Stones (1971)**

To me, this song speaks of acceptance and forgiveness: “No sweeping exit or offstage lines/could make me feel bitter or treat you unkind.” It’s about two people recognizing the intense pain they’ve put each other through and yet still deciding to move on together.

### **“Just Breathe,” Pearl Jam (2009)**

Okay, my long preamble about period music notwithstanding, I allowed myself one anachronism, because I wanted to end with a love song. Of course it had to be a melancholy one, one about (not) forgetting to say the important things. Recently I discovered that Willie Nelson has covered this song, but for my money Eddie Vedder sang it just about perfectly.



# FURTHER READING

## **On Paper Sons and Chinese immigration**

“My Father Was a Paper Son,” Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation

Read at: [aiisf.org/stories-by-author/737-my-father-was-a-paper-son](http://aiisf.org/stories-by-author/737-my-father-was-a-paper-son)

A personal story, with a lot of good background about the discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants in the era, both during immigration and afterward.

“Chinese-American Descendants Uncover Forged Family Histories,” NPR

Read at: [npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/12/17/251833652/chinese-american-descendants-uncover-forged-family-history](http://npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/12/17/251833652/chinese-american-descendants-uncover-forged-family-history)

An overview of how Chinese Americans are attempting to sort out their complicated family history after learning their ancestors were paper sons.

## **On women at Radcliffe in the 1950s**

“Birth of a Feminist,” *Harvard Magazine*

Read at: [harvardmagazine.com/2005/03/birth-of-a-feminist.html](http://harvardmagazine.com/2005/03/birth-of-a-feminist.html)

An essay by a member of the Radcliffe class of 1958 (so one year older than Marilyn in my novel), recalling how women were treated in college at the time. This writer was in the humanities, but her description of the atmosphere and attitudes of the time, and the conflict she felt about marriage and career, is really striking.