

Shifting Gears: The Evolution of Nath and Lydia's Relationship

In *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng, the complex relationships within the Lee family reveal both their shared bonds and individual struggles. The Lee family is an interracial household living in a predominantly white town in 1970s Ohio. James Lee, a Chinese American professor, and his white American wife, Marilyn, struggle with raising their three children—Nath, Lydia, and Hannah—in a society that continually marginalizes them. Among the family's many intricate dynamics, the relationship between Lydia and her brother Nath stands out. This essay examines how Nath and Lydia's shared experiences of diaspora both connect and divide them. The weight of societal pressures and parental expectations gradually transforms their once-supportive bond into a suffocating one, ultimately playing a significant role in Lydia's tragic end.

To understand the relationship between Nath and Lydia, it's crucial to examine the external pressures they face, particularly racial isolation and parental expectations. Both Nath and Lydia have experienced microaggressions as well as overt acts of racism due to their mixed race. For instance, when Nath was a child, other kids mocked him during a game of Marco Polo by taunting, "Chink can't find China" (90). Similarly, Lydia faced alienating remarks from a young age. On her first day of kindergarten, her popular classmate asked, "Do Chinese people celebrate Thanksgiving?" and "Do Chinese people have bellybuttons?" (165). These interactions reveal how both Nath and Lydia share a sense of alienation due to their racial identity, even though it's not clear that they explicitly verbalize those feelings to each other. This shared experience fosters a quiet, supportive bond between them, as seen in Nath's consistent care for Lydia. He always remembers to save her a seat at lunch or on the bus, making her feel less alone (166). In a world where the siblings feel misunderstood and judged, the quiet loyalty and

companionship between them serve as their sanctuary. This bond, however, intensifies their reliance on each other, potentially crossing into co-dependence, as they lack many meaningful friendships outside of their sibling connection.

The high expectations placed on Nath and Lydia from their parents leads to both of them internalizing it in different ways. For Nath, his father's expectations center on an idealized version of American masculinity. James envisions Nath as popular, athletic, and outgoing—"the star of the team, the collector of trophies, the anchorman in the relay," someone who would naturally fit into social circles by "driving everyone to the diner" after meets (88). But Nath's quiet, nerdy nature falls short of this ideal, and his father's disappointment is clear. For example, when Nath excitedly talks about space, James dismisses him with a hard slap that leaves his "teeth rattling" (134). In contrast, Marilyn is deeply invested in pushing her daughter toward a future as a doctor having "...spun out Lydia's future in one long golden thread..." (159). This difference in parental focus shapes how the siblings relate to each other under the weight of these expectations. Nath often comforts Lydia who feels overwhelmed by her 'tiger mom' by reassuring her that "too much love was better than too little" (168). When their father makes passive-aggressive remarks toward Nath, Lydia gives her brother a sympathetic smile, showing a quiet understanding of his struggle (156). These acts strengthen their bond, allowing them to subtly support each other against the unfair demands of their parents.

As discussed in the last paragraph, Nath is often ignored by their parents, who are preoccupied with Lydia and their ambitions for her. This neglect, while painful, gives Nath the space to form his own sense of identity: he develops a passion for space and dreams of leaving home to study at Harvard. Although throughout the novel Lydia shows little interest in medicine as described by her "quieting the reluctance that bubbled within", she is also never shown to

demonstrate any passion in any other field the way Nath does (160). Given the influence of a controlling parent, it's no surprise her freedom to explore potential interests was limited.

While Nath and Lydia support each other in subtle ways, their relationship is also complicated by an underlying rivalry. The siblings seem to be in a competition for their parents' attention, which neither openly sought out. It seems that in their household only one child can occupy the spotlight at a time. This implicit rule is highlighted when Nath's acceptance to Harvard is briefly celebrated, only for Lydia to divert attention back to herself with her subpar physics grade (170). This leads to Nath becoming upset at her and understanding the nature of their inverse relationship (172).

The consequences of this rivalry are shown during a scene at the siblings at the lake. In a moment of frustration, Nath pushes Lydia, unable to swim, into the water—yet he quickly pulls her back, keeping her alive. The initial push shows the resentment Nath has built up towards Lydia, due to jealousy about her position as the favored child. The passage following the incident begins: “It was too big to talk about, what had happened. It was like a landscape, they could not see all at once; it was like the sky at night, which turned and turned so they couldn't find its edges. It would always feel too big” (155). This shows how they don't address the incident after and instead have a silent mutual acknowledgement. It also relates to the frequent theme with lack of communication throughout the family as well as the title of the book *Everything I Never Told You*. This moment becomes a defining memory for each sibling and the passage continues: “He pushed her in. And then he pulled her out. All her life Lydia would remember one thing. All his life, Nath would remember another” (155). While Nath primarily remembers the push, Lydia remembers Nath's savior act as her life raft. This pivotal incident encapsulates the tension

between support and resentment in their relationship as well as their differing perspectives on their relationship.

Later in the novel, a passage reveals Lydia's evolving perspective on her relationship with Nath, illuminating her inner conflict and sense of helplessness. In this passage, Lydia is being taught how to drive by her neighbor, Jack. “‘I know what to do,’ Lydia said. ‘I just can’t do it.’ Her hand had cramped into a claw around the gearshift and she pried it away. Partners, she reminded herself. The gas and the clutch were partners. It struck her how that wasn’t true. If one went up, the other had to go down. That was how everything went... maybe there was no such thing as partners, she thought... For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. One went up, the other down. One gained, the other lost. One escaped, the other trapped forever” (255). Lydia’s struggle to learn the stick-shift car reflects her underlying struggle to gain control of her life. Her desire to drive represents a wish for freedom, one she dreamed of earlier when she envisioned herself exploring the world beyond her family (220). However, her failure in this lesson signals her gradual surrender of this hope, which could explain why she later doesn’t even try to study for her permit test, as Hannah later notices (237). Although in this passage she knows theoretically “what to do,” she remains paralyzed, unable to act. This helplessness foreshadows her the nature of her death scene, where she makes a set of promises, showing she knows how to improve her relationships and fix her situation (274). Yet, right after making all these promises, Lydia is still unable to act on any of them, symbolized by her inability to swim by herself. Lydia seems to have developed a reliance on Nath and never learned independence. Without Nath, she is figuratively—and then literally—drowning (276).

In the latter half of the passage, Lydia’s thoughts about partnership become a reflection on her relationship with Nath. She comes to see their bond as an inverse dynamic rather than one

of mutual support. While their relationship has always swung between support and competition, she now feels that their well-being is a zero-sum game: one thrives while the other suffers (255). Lydia internalizes this as the idea that Nath's freedom in college must come at her own expense, trapping her in the loneliness of her home. Nath, too, wrestles with this sense of opposition, as seen when he intentionally withholds reassurance from Lydia, knowing that comforting her would require him to relive his own pain (172).

A complete turning point in their relationship occurs when Nath sets his eyes on leaving for Harvard. As he begins to envision his future independent of the family, he emotionally withdraws from Lydia as well: "Dreaming of his future, he no longer heard all the things she did not say" (164). Lydia feels this shift as a betrayal, fearing for her abandonment. Her response is to hide his Harvard acceptance and orientation day letters, hoping to keep him from leaving (166, 224). This act of dishonesty reflects her desperation to hold onto him, even as it drives a wedge between them and erodes their trust. The final breaking point in their relationship is marked by Nath's failure to call Lydia as promised during his college orientation (262). When he finally does speak with her, Lydia realizes that his words are empty of the understanding and sympathy they used to have: "All the words were right, but in this new Nath's voice, they sounded so trivial and hollow—the way anyone else might have heard them" (263). This moment is significant because it shows how Nath's newfound independence has allowed him to no longer feel emotionally responsible for Lydia. This shift in their relationship reflects a common reality of growing up: sometimes, in the pursuit of independence, those closest to us become strangers.

Just as Lydia struggles to hold on to Nath, I once found myself grappling with my sister's absence due to her own pursuits. I wasn't quite a teenager yet, and my *Bajee* ('respected older sister') was a few years older than me. I sat on the staircase of our new house in a small,

unfamiliar town in upstate New York, eight hours away from the life we left in Boston. My grandma who used to care for us was gone. After another silent day at school, I came home to the same silence. *Bajee* would walk past me, her eyes glued to her phone, not noticing mine, trying to catch hers. Months had passed, and though I still waited for her attention, nothing ever changed. She had her distractions, but I had none. Well I had my imagination and daydreaming, but that was a dangerous game that always led to crying over memories of our family in Boston. We still lived under the same roof, but it didn't feel like it.

At dinner, our parents argued. *Bajee* remained locked on her screen, and I stared at nothing, wondering if I still knew how to speak and if I would notice if I'd forgotten. When she was done eating, she went straight to her room without a word. This time, my mom knocked on *Bajee's* door, calling her downstairs. My mom handed her a new phone, and then turned to me, saying I could have *Bajee's* old one.

I held the small, cracked phone in my hand, feeling tears start to fall. This tiny, stupid object had somehow stolen my sister. I didn't have anyone's number from Boston; back then, none of us in elementary school had phones. And here, in this new town, there was no one I'd want to contact. I thought holding this phone might help me understand why *Bajee* loved it more than me, but it only made me feel worse.

As soon as everyone drifted back to their rooms, an impulse seized me. I raised a kitchen knife and brought it down—hard. Once, twice, then five more times, the blade piercing the screen with a visceral crunch. The glass splintered, tiny shards piercing my skin, sharp and unforgiving, but I didn't feel any relief. I just stood there, holding the mangled, useless thing, and felt emptier than before. Over five years would pass before my sister acknowledged my presence again. We would never be close and I would never ask for an explanation.

While parents have a clear duty to care for their children, the responsibility of an older sibling is much harder to define. Siblings occupy a complex space in our lives: they are both companions and competitors, friends and emotional mirrors. Much like my experience of drifting apart from my sister, Lydia's relationship with Nath reveals the isolation that can arise even within family bonds. In my sister's case, her phone became a refuge from the dysfunction of our parents, allowing her to connect with friends and find solace outside the family dynamic. Is it possible to grow without leaving someone behind, or does self-discovery inherently demand a degree of separation? Nath didn't choose to take on the role of Lydia's emotional support, and navigating his own struggles while trying to support Lydia creates a deep emotional conflict. How do we retain a sense of self in the face of familial bonds that pull us in different directions? His detachment is not a personal failing; it reflects the difficult dynamics that can arise in families.

The shift from a supportive to a suffocating relationship is vividly depicted in two contrasting scenes. In the first, Lydia falls into the lake but survives, relying entirely on Nath to keep her afloat since she never learned to swim (193). Lydia's emotional dependency on Nath is rooted in her isolation, a feeling partially attributed to how her father James describes "if she'd been a white girl... she would have fit in" (203). This isolation anchors Lydia to Nath, him as her buoy. However, Nath cannot grow as a person or establish his independence without breaking free from this emotional dependency. This leads to a later, parallel scene in which Nath is absent when Lydia drowns (276). Her drowning is symbolic of all the pressure she was under and her inability to be self-reliant. The weight of parental expectations and societal pressures forced Nath to distance himself, ultimately playing a significant role in Lydia's death.

In exploring the complex dynamics between Nath and Lydia, we are confronted with broader questions about the nature of familial bonds and the impact of societal expectations on individual identities. Nath's role evolves from supportive to stifling, and Lydia becomes trapped in her reliance of him. The Lee family's struggles reflect not only personal conflicts but also the weight of cultural pressures that shape their lives. The implications of Lydia's death raise critical reflections on the fragility of human connections and how unspoken expectations and tensions can culminate in devastating outcomes.

Works Cited

Ng, Celeste. *Everything I Never Told You*. Abacus, 2014.