

*one*

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. As always, next to her cereal bowl, her mother has placed a sharpened pencil and Lydia's physics homework, six problems flagged with small ticks. Driving to work, Lydia's father nudges the dial toward WXXP, Northwest Ohio's Best News Source, vexed by the crackles of static. On the stairs, Lydia's brother yawns, still twined in the tail end of his dream. And in her chair in the corner of the kitchen, Lydia's sister hunches moon-eyed over her cornflakes, sucking them to pieces one by one, waiting for Lydia to appear. It's she who says, at last, "Lydia's taking a long time today."

Upstairs, Marilyn opens her daughter's door and sees the bed unslept in: neat hospital corners still pleated beneath the







kan, turns the page. *Archduke France Ferdinand was assassinated by members of Black Ann. Franz, he thinks. Black Hand.* Had these students ever opened their books? He pictures himself at the front of the lecture hall, pointer in hand, the map of Europe unfurled behind him. It's an intro class, "America and the World Wars"; he doesn't expect depth of knowledge or critical insight. Just a basic understanding of the facts, and one student who can spell *Czechoslovakia* correctly.

He closes the paper and writes the score on the front page—sixty-five out of one hundred—and circles it. Every year as summer approaches, the students shuffle and rustle; sparks of resentment sizzle up like flares, then sputter out against the windowless walls of the lecture hall. Their papers grow halfhearted, paragraphs trailing off, sometimes midsentence, as if the students could not hold a thought that long. Was it a waste, he wonders. All the lecture notes he's honed, all the color slides of MacArthur and Truman and the maps of Guadalcanal. Nothing more than funny names to giggle at, the whole course just one more requirement to check off the list before they graduated. What else could he expect from this place? He stacks the paper with the others and drops the pen on top. Through the window he can see the small green quad and three kids in blue jeans tossing a Frisbee.

When he was younger, still junior faculty, James was often mistaken for a student himself. That hasn't happened in years. He'll be forty-six next spring; he's tenured, a few silver hairs now mixed in among the black. Sometimes, though, he's still mistaken for other things. Once, a receptionist at the provost's

office thought he was a visiting diplomat from Japan and asked him about his flight from Tokyo. He enjoys the surprise on people's faces when he tells them he's a professor of American history. "Well, I *am* American," he says when people blink, a barb of defensiveness in his tone.

Someone knocks: his teaching assistant, Louisa, with a stack of papers.

"Professor Lee. I didn't mean to bother you, but your door was open." She sets the essays on his desk and pauses. "These weren't very good."

"No. My half weren't either. I was hoping you had all the As in your stack."

Louisa laughs. When he'd first seen her, in his graduate seminar last term, she'd surprised him. From the back she could have been his daughter: they had almost the same hair, hanging dark and glossy down to the shoulder blades, the same way of sitting with elbows pulled in close to the body. When she turned around, though, her face was completely her own, narrow where Lydia's was wide, her eyes brown and steady. "Professor Lee?" she had said, holding out her hand. "I'm Louisa Chen." Eighteen years at Middlewood College, he'd thought, and here was the first Oriental student he'd ever had. Without realizing it, he had found himself smiling.

Then, a week later, she came to his office. "Is that your family?" she'd asked, tilting the photo on his desk toward her. There was a pause as she studied it. Everyone did the same thing, and that was why he kept the photo on display. He watched her eyes move from his photographic face to his

wife's, then his children's, then back again. "Oh," she said after a moment, and he could tell she was trying to hide her confusion. "Your wife's—not Chinese?"

It was what everyone said. But from her he had expected something different.

"No," he said, and straightened the frame so that it faced her a little more squarely, a perfect forty-five-degree angle to the front of the desk. "No, she isn't."

Still, at the end of the fall semester, he'd asked her to act as a grader for his undergraduate lecture. And in April, he'd asked her to be the teaching assistant for his summer course.

"I hope the summer students will be better," Louisa says now. "A few people insisted that the Cape-to-Cairo Railroad was in Europe. For college students, they have surprising trouble with geography."

"Well, this isn't Harvard, that's for sure," James says. He pushes the two piles of essays into one and evens them, like a deck of cards, against the desktop. "Sometimes I wonder if it's all a waste."

"You can't blame yourself if the students don't try. And they're not all so bad. A few got As." Louisa blinks at him, her eyes suddenly serious. "Your life is not a waste."

James had meant only the intro course, teaching these students who, year after year, didn't care to learn even the basic timeline. She's twenty-three, he thinks; she knows nothing about life, wasted or otherwise. But it's a nice thing to hear.

"Stay still," he says. "There's something in your hair." Her hair is cool and a little damp, not quite dry from her morning

shower. Louisa holds quite still, her eyes open and fixed on his face. It's not a flower petal, as he'd first thought. It's a ladybug, and as he picks it out, it tiptoes, on threadlike yellow legs, to hang upside down from his fingernail.

"Damn things are everywhere this time of year," says a voice from the doorway, and James looks up to see Stanley Hewitt leaning through. He doesn't like Stan—a florid ham hock of a man who talks to him loudly and slowly, as if he's hard of hearing, who makes stupid jokes that start *George Washington, Buffalo Bill, and Spiro Agnew walk into a bar . . .*

"Did you want something, Stan?" James asks. He's acutely conscious of his hand, index finger and thumb outstretched as if pointing a popgun at Louisa's shoulder, and pulls it back.

"Just wanted to ask a question about the dean's latest memo," Stanley says, holding up a mimeographed sheet. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"I have to get going anyway," Louisa says. "Have a nice morning, Professor Lee. I'll see you tomorrow. You too, Professor Hewitt." As she slides past Stanley into the hallway, James sees that she's blushing, and his own face grows hot. When she is gone, Stanley seats himself on the corner of James's desk.

"Good-looking girl," he says. "She'll be your assistant this summer too, no?"

"Yes." James unfolds his hand as the ladybug moves onto his fingertip, walking the path of his fingerprint, around and around in whorls and loops. He wants to smash his fist into the middle of Stanley's grin, to feel Stanley's slightly crooked

front tooth slice his knuckles. Instead he smashes the ladybug with his thumb. The shell snaps between his fingers, like a popcorn hull, and the insect crumbles to sulfur-colored powder. Stanley keeps running his finger along the spines of James's books. Later James will long for the ignorant calm of this moment, for that last second when Stan's leer was the worst problem on his mind. But for now, when the phone rings, he is so relieved at the interruption that at first he doesn't hear the anxiety in Marilyn's voice.

"James?" she says. "Could you come home?"

The police tell them lots of teenagers leave home with no warning. Lots of times, they say, the girls are mad at their parents and the parents don't even know. Nath watches them circulate in his sister's room. He expects talcum powder and feather dusters, sniffing dogs, magnifying glasses. Instead the policemen just *look*: at the posters thumbtacked above her desk, the shoes on the floor, the half-opened bookbag. Then the younger one places his palm on the rounded pink lid of Lydia's perfume bottle, as if cupping a child's head in his hand.

Most missing-girl cases, the older policeman tells them, resolve themselves within twenty-four hours. The girls come home by themselves.

"What does that mean?" Nath says. "*Most*? What does that mean?"

The policeman peers over the top of his bifocals. "In the vast majority of cases," he says.

"Eighty percent?" Nath says. "Ninety? Ninety-five?"

"Nathan," James says. "That's enough. Let Officer Fiske do his work."

The younger officer jots down the particulars in his notebook: Lydia Elizabeth Lee, sixteen, last seen Monday May 2, flowered halter-neck dress, parents James and Marilyn Lee. At this Officer Fiske studies James closely, a memory surfacing in his mind.

"Now, your wife also went missing once?" he says. "I remember the case. In sixty-six, wasn't it?"

Warmth spreads along the back of James's neck, like sweat dripping behind his ears. He is glad, now, that Marilyn is waiting by the phone downstairs. "That was a misunderstanding," he says stiffly. "A miscommunication between my wife and myself. A family matter."

"I see." The older officer pulls out his own pad and makes a note, and James raps his knuckle against the corner of Lydia's desk.

"Anything else?"

In the kitchen, the policemen flip through the family albums looking for a clear head shot. "This one," Hannah says, pointing. It's a snapshot from last Christmas. Lydia had been sullen, and Nath had tried to cheer her up, to blackmail a smile out of her through the camera. It hadn't worked. She sits next to the tree, back against the wall, alone in the shot. Her face is a dare. The directness of her stare, straight out of the page

with not even a hint of profile, says *What are you looking at?* In the picture, Nath can't distinguish the blue of her irises from the black of her pupils, her eyes like dark holes in the shiny paper. When he'd picked up the photos at the drugstore, he had regretted capturing this moment, the hard look on his sister's face. But now, he admits, looking at the photograph in Hannah's hand, this looks like her—at least, the way she looked when he had seen her last.

"Not that one," James says. "Not with Lydia making a face like that. People will think she looks like that all the time. Pick a nice one." He flips a few pages and pries out the last snapshot. "This one's better."

At her sixteenth birthday, the week before, Lydia sits at the table with a lipsticked smile. Though her face is turned toward the camera, her eyes are looking at something outside the photo's white border. What's so funny? Nath wonders. He can't remember if it was him, or something their father said, or if Lydia was laughing to herself about something none of the rest of them knew. She looks like a model in a magazine ad, lips dark and sharp, a plate of perfectly frosted cake poised on a delicate hand, having an improbably good time.

James pushes the birthday photo across the table toward the policemen, and the younger one slides it into a manila folder and stands up.

"This will be just fine," he says. "We'll make up a flyer in case she doesn't turn up by tomorrow. Don't worry. I'm sure she will." He leaves a fleck of spit on the photo album page and Hannah wipes it away with her finger.

"She wouldn't just leave," Marilyn says. "What if it's some crazy? Some psycho kidnapping girls?" Her hand drifts to that morning's newspaper, still lying in the center of the table.

"Try not to worry, ma'am," Officer Fiske says. "Things like that, they hardly ever happen. In the vast majority of cases—" He glances at Nath, then clears his throat. "The girls almost always come home."

When the policemen have gone, Marilyn and James sit down with a piece of scratch paper. The police have suggested they call all of Lydia's friends, anyone who might know where she's gone. Together they construct a list: Pam Saunders. Jenn Pittman. Shelley Brierley. Nath doesn't correct them, but these girls have never been Lydia's friends. Lydia has been in school with them since kindergarten, and now and then they call, giggly and shrill, and Lydia shouts through the line, "I got it." Some evenings she sits for hours on the window seat on the landing, the phone base cradled in her lap, receiver wedged between ear and shoulder. When their parents walk by, she lowers her voice to a confidential murmur, twirling the cord around her little finger until they go away. This, Nath knows, is why his parents write their names on the list with such confidence.

But Nath's seen Lydia at school, how in the cafeteria she sits silent while the others chatter; how, when they've finished copying her homework, she quietly slides her notebook back into her bookbag. After school, she walks to the bus alone and settles into the seat beside him in silence. Once, he had stayed on the phone line after Lydia picked up and heard not gossip,



but his sister's voice duly rattling off assignments—*read Act 1 of Othello, do the odd-numbered problems in Section 5*—then quiet after the hang-up click. The next day, while Lydia was curled on the window seat, phone pressed to her ear, he'd picked up the extension in the kitchen and heard only the low drone of the dial tone. Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known. If their father says, "Lydia, how's Pam doing?" Lydia says, "Oh, she's great, she just made the pep squad," and Nath doesn't contradict her. He's amazed at the stillness in her face, the way she can lie without even a raised eyebrow to give her away.

Except he can't tell his parents that now. He watches his mother scribble names on the back of an old receipt, and when she says to him and Hannah, "Anyone else you can think of?" he thinks of Jack and says no.

All spring, Lydia has been hanging around Jack—or the other way around. Every afternoon, practically, driving around in that Beetle of his, coming home just in time for dinner, when she pretended she'd been at school all the time. It had emerged suddenly, this friendship—Nath refused to use any other word. Jack and his mother have lived on the corner since the first grade, and once Nath thought they could be friends. It hadn't turned out that way. Jack had humiliated him in front of the other kids, had laughed when Nath's mother was gone, when Nath had thought she might never come back. As if, Nath thinks now, as if Jack had any right to be talking, when he had no father. All the neighbors had whispered about it when the Wolffs had moved in, how Janet Wolff was *divorced*, how Jack

ran wild while she worked late shifts at the hospital. That summer, they'd whispered about Nath's parents, too—but Nath's mother had come back. Jack's mother was still divorced. And Jack still ran wild.

And now? Just last week, driving home from an errand, he'd seen Jack out walking that dog of his. He had come around the lake, about to turn onto their little dead-end street, when he saw Jack on the path by the bank, tall and lanky, the dog loping just ahead of him toward a tree. Jack was wearing an old, faded T-shirt and his sandy curls stood up, unbrushed. As Nath drove past, Jack looked up and gave the merest nod of the head, a cigarette clenched in the corner of his mouth. The gesture, Nath had thought, was less one of greeting than of recognition. Beside Jack, the dog had stared him in the eye and casually lifted its leg. And Lydia had spent all spring with him.

If he says anything now, Nath thinks, they'll say, *Why didn't we know about this before?* He'll have to explain that all those afternoons when he'd said, "Lydia's studying with a friend," or "Lydia's staying after to work on math," he had really meant, *She's with Jack* or *She's riding in Jack's car* or *She's out with him* *god knows where*. More than that: saying Jack's name would mean admitting something he doesn't want to. That Jack was a part of Lydia's life at all, that he'd been part of her life for months.

Across the table, Marilyn looks up the numbers in the phone book and reads them out; James does the calling, carefully and slowly, clicking the dial around with one finger. With each call his voice becomes more confused. *No? She didn't mention anything to you, any plans? Oh. I see. Well. Thank you anyway.*

Nath studies the grain of the kitchen table, the open album in front of him. The missing photo leaves a gap in the page, a clear plastic window showing the blank white lining of the cover. Their mother runs her hand down the column of the phone book, staining her fingertip gray. Under cover of the tablecloth, Hannah stretches her legs and touches one toe to Nath's. A toe of comfort. But he doesn't look up. Instead he closes the album, and across the table, his mother crosses another name off the list.

When they've called the last number, James puts the telephone down. He takes the slip of paper from Marilyn and crosses out *Karen Adler*, bisecting the K into two neat Vs. Under the line he can still see the name. Karen Adler. Marilyn never let Lydia go out on weekends until she'd finished all her schoolwork—and by then, it was usually Sunday afternoon. Sometimes, those Sunday afternoons, Lydia met her friends at the mall, wheedling a ride: "A couple of us are going to the movies. *Annie Hall*. Karen is *dying* to see it." He'd pull a ten from his wallet and push it across the table to her, meaning: *All right, now go and have some fun*. He realizes now that he had never seen a ticket stub, that for as long as he can remember, Lydia had been alone on the curb when he came to take her home. Dozens of evenings he'd paused at the foot of the stairs and smiled, listening to Lydia's half of a conversation float down from the landing above: "Oh my god, I *know*, right? So then what did she say?" But now, he knows, she hasn't called Karen or Pam or Jenn in years. He thinks now of those long afternoons, when they'd thought she was staying after school

to study. Yawning gaps of time when she could have been anywhere, doing anything. In a moment, James realizes he's obliterated Karen Adler's name under a crosshatch of black ink.

He lifts the phone again and dials. "Officer Fiske, please. Yes, this is James Lee. We've called all of Lydia's—" He hesitates. "Everyone she knows from school. No, nothing. All right, thank you. Yes, we will."

"They're sending an officer out to look for her," he says, setting the receiver back on the hook. "They said to keep the phone line open in case she calls."

Dinnertime comes and goes, but none of them can imagine eating. It seems like something only people in films do, something lovely and decorative, that whole act of raising a fork to your mouth. Some kind of purposeless ceremony. The phone does not ring. At midnight, James sends the children to bed and, though they don't argue, stands at the foot of the stairs until they've gone up. "Twenty bucks says Lydia calls before morning," he says, a little too heartily. No one laughs. The phone still does not ring.

Upstairs, Nath shuts the door to his room and hesitates. What he wants is to find Jack—who, he's sure, knows where Lydia is. But he cannot sneak out with his parents still awake. His mother is already on edge, startling every time the refrigerator motor kicks on or off. In any case, from the window he can see that the Wolfs' house is dark. The driveway, where Jack's steel-gray VW usually sits, is empty. As usual, Jack's mother has forgotten to leave the front-door light on.

He tries to think: had Lydia seemed strange the night

before? He had been away four whole days, by himself for the first time in his life, visiting Harvard—Harvard!—where he would be headed in the fall. In those last days of class before reading period—“Two weeks to cram and party before exams,” his host student, Andy, had explained—the campus had had a restless, almost festive air. All weekend he’d wandered awestruck, trying to take it all in: the fluted pillars of the enormous library, the red brick of the buildings against the bright green of the lawns, the sweet chalk smell that lingered in each lecture hall. The purposeful stride he saw in everyone’s walk, as if they knew they were destined for greatness. Friday he had spent the night in a sleeping bag on Andy’s floor and woke up at one when Andy’s roommate, Wes, came in with his girlfriend. The light had flicked on and Nath froze in place, blinking at the doorway, where a tall, bearded boy and the girl holding his hand slowly emerged from the blinding haze. She had long, red hair, loose in waves around her face. “Sorry,” Wes had said and flipped the lights off, and Nath heard their careful footsteps as they made their way across the common room to Wes’s bedroom. He had kept his eyes open, letting them readjust to the dark, thinking, *So this is what college is like.*

Now he thinks back to last night, when he had arrived home just before dinner. Lydia had been holed up in her room, and when they sat down at the table, he’d asked her how the past few days had been. She’d shrugged and barely glanced up from her plate, and he had assumed this meant *nothing new*. Now he can’t remember if she’d even said hello.

In her room, up in the attic, Hannah leans over the edge of

her bed and fishes her book from beneath the dust ruffle. It’s Lydia’s book, actually: *The Sound and the Fury*. Advanced English. Not meant for fifth graders. She’d filched it from Lydia’s room a few weeks ago, and Lydia hadn’t even noticed. Over the past two weeks she’s worked her way through it, a little each night, savoring the words like a cherry Life Saver tucked inside her cheek. Tonight, somehow, the book seems different. Only when she flips back, to where she stopped the day before, does she understand. Throughout, Lydia has underlined words here and there, occasionally scribbling a note from class lectures. *Order vs. chaos. Corruption of Southern aristocratic values.* After this page, the book is untouched. Hannah flips through the rest: no notes, no doodles, no blue to break up the black. She’s reached the point where Lydia stopped reading, she realizes, and she doesn’t feel like reading any more.

Last night, lying awake, she had watched the moon drift across the sky like a slow balloon. She couldn’t see it moving, but if she looked away, then back through the window, she could see that it had. In a little while, she had thought, it would impale itself on the shadow of the big spruce in the backyard. It took a long time. She was almost asleep when she heard a soft thud, and for a moment she thought that the moon had actually hit the tree. But when she looked outside, the moon was gone, almost hidden behind a cloud. Her glow-in-the-dark clock said it was two A.M.

She lay quiet, not even wiggling her toes, and listened. The noise had sounded like the front door closing. It was sticky: you had to push it with your hip to get it to latch. *Burglars!* she

thought. Through the window, she saw a single figure crossing the front lawn. Not a burglar, just a thin silhouette against darker night, moving away. Lydia? A vision of life without her sister in it had flashed across her mind. She would have the good chair at the table, looking out the window at the lilac bushes in the yard, the big bedroom downstairs near everyone else. At dinnertime, they would pass her the potatoes first. She would get her father's jokes, her brother's secrets, her mother's best smiles. Then the figure reached the street and disappeared, and she wondered if she had seen it at all.

Now, in her room, she looks down at the tangle of text. It was Lydia, she's sure of it now. Should she tell? Her mother would be upset that Hannah had let Lydia, her favorite, just walk away. And Nath? She thinks of the way Nath's eyebrows have been drawn together all evening, the way he has bitten his lip so hard, without realizing, that it has begun to crack and bleed. He'd be angry, too. He'd say, *Why didn't you run out and catch her?* But I didn't know where she was going, Hannah whispers into the dark. I didn't know she was really going anywhere.

Wednesday morning James calls the police again. Were there any leads? They were checking all possibilities. Could the officer tell them anything, anything at all? They still expected Lydia would come home on her own. They

were following up and would, of course, keep the family informed.

James listens to all this and nods, though he knows Officer Fiske can't see him. He hangs up and sits back down at the table without looking at Marilyn or Nath or Hannah. He doesn't need to explain anything: they can tell by the look on his face that there's no news.

It doesn't seem right to do anything but wait. The children stay home from school. Television, magazines, radio: everything feels frivolous in the face of their fear. Outside, it's sunny, the air crisp and cool, but no one suggests that they move to the porch or the yard. Even housekeeping seems wrong: some clue might be sucked into the vacuum, some hint obliterated by lifting the dropped book and placing it, upright, on the shelf. So the family waits. They cluster at the table, afraid to meet each other's eyes, staring at the wood grain of the tabletop as if it's a giant fingerprint, or a map locating what they seek.

It's not until Wednesday afternoon that a passerby notices the rowboat out on the lake, adrift in the windless day. Years ago, the lake had been Middlewood's reservoir, before the water tower was built. Now, edged with grass, it's a swimming hole in summer; kids dive off the wooden dock, and for birthday parties and picnics, a park employee unties the rowboat kept there. No one thinks much of it: a slipped mooring, a harmless prank. It is not a priority. A note is made for an officer to check it; a note is made for the commissioner of

parks. It's not until late Wednesday, almost midnight, that a lieutenant, going over loose ends from the day shift, makes the connection and calls the Lees to ask if Lydia ever played with the boat on the lake.

"Of course not," James says. Lydia had refused, *refused*, to take swim classes at the Y. He'd been a swimmer as a teenager himself; he'd taught Nath to swim at age three. With Lydia he'd started too late, and she was already five when he took her to the pool for the first time and waded into the shallow end, water barely to his waist, and waited. Lydia would not even come near the water. She'd laid down in her swimsuit by the side of the pool and cried, and James finally hoisted himself out, swim trunks dripping but top half dry, and promised he would not make her jump. Even now, though the lake is so close, Lydia goes in just ankle-deep in summer, to wash the dirt from her feet.

"Of course not," James says again. "Lydia doesn't know how to swim." It's not until he says these words into the telephone that he understands why the police are asking. As he speaks, the entire family catches a chill, as if they know exactly what the police will find.

It's not until early Thursday morning, just after dawn, that the police drag the lake and find her.