Linger
ing
Little
Fires

Celeste Ng

This book contains the final chapter of Celeste Ng's 2017 Novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*. The main body text is set in 9/15 pt PMN Caecilia, designed by Peter Matthias Noordzij. The typeface is a slab serif that emphasizes the humanist letterforms. The cover and the inside pages are printed on Mohawk Superfine Eggshell.

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After the fire trucks had gone, the shell of the Richardson house now gaping and blackened and steaming gently, Mrs. Richardson pulled her bathrobe tightly around herself and took stock. There was Mr. Richardson on what had been their front walkway, consulting with the fire chief and two policemen. There were Lexie and Trip and Moody, perched on the hood of Lexie's car across the street, watching their parents, awaiting instruction. It had not been lost on Mrs. Richardson that Izzy was missing, and—she was sure—this was what her husband was discussing with the policemen right now. He would be giving them a description, asking them to help find her. Isabelle Marie Richardson, she thought with a mixture of fury and shame. What on earth have you done? She said as much to the policemen, to the firemen, to her children and her abashed husband. "Reckless," she said. "How could she do this?" Behind her, one of the firemen placed the charred remnants of the jerry can into the truck—to send to the insurance company, she had no doubt. "When Izzy comes back," Lexie murmured to Trip, "Mom is going to *slaughter* her."

It was only when the fire chief asked where they would be staying that Mrs. Richardson saw the obvious solution.

"At our rental house," she said. "Over on Winslow Road, near Lynnfield." To her puzzled husband and children, she said only, "It was vacated yesterday."

It took some maneuvering to fit three cars into the narrow driveway at the Winslow house, and while Lexie finally parked her Explorer by the curb, Mrs. Richardson had a sudden fear that the apartment would not be empty after all: that they might go upstairs and open the door and find Mia and Pearl still there, placidly eating their lunches at the table, refusing to leave. Or perhaps Mia would have left behind some kind of statement: a mess to clean up, broken windows or smashed walls, one last middle finger to her landlords. But when the Richardson family had stowed all four cars at last and paraded up the steps—much to Mr. Yang's confusion—there was no sign of anyone upstairs, just a few pieces of discarded furniture. Mrs. Richardson nodded in approval and relief.

"It looks so different," Lexie murmured. And it did. The three remaining Richardson children clustered together in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, so close their shoulders nearly touched. In the kitchen the cupboards were empty, the two mismatched chairs pushed neatly under the rickety table. Moody thought of how many times he'd sat at that table beside Pearl,

doing homework, eating a bowl of cereal. Lexie scanned the living room: only a few throw pillows stacked on the carpet, bare walls now except for some stray thumbtack holes in the plaster. Trip glanced toward the bedroom, where through the open door he could see Pearl's bed, stripped of its sheets and blankets, reduced now to a bare mattress and frame.

Perfectly serviceable, Mrs. Richardson thought. Two bedrooms, one for the adults and one for the boys. The girls—for she was still certain Izzy would be back with them shortly—could sleep on the three-season porch. A bathroom and a half—well, they would have to share. It would only be for a little while, until they could find something more suitable, until their house could be repaired.

"Mom," Lexie called from the kitchen. "Mom, look at this." On the counter lay a large manila envelope, thick with papers. It could have been left behind by mistake—some of Mia's paperwork or Pearl's schoolwork, perhaps, overlooked in their hasty departure. Even before Mrs. Richardson touched it, though, she knew this was not the case. The paper was like satin under her fingers, the flap carefully fastened but not gummed, and as she pried the fastener open with a fingernail and opened the envelope, the remaining Richardsons clustered around her to see what it contained.

There was one for each of them. Mia had stacked them neatly inside: half portraits, half wishes, caught on paper. Each of the Richardsons, as Mrs. Richardson carefully laid the photos out on the table in a line, knew which was meant for them, recognized it instantly, as they might have recognized their own faces. To the others it was just another photo, but to them it was unbearably intimate, like catching a glimpse of your own naked body in a mirror.

A sheet of paper sliced into strips, thin as matchsticks, woven to form a net. Suspended in its mesh: a rounded, heavy stone. The text had been sliced to unreadable bits, but Lexie recognized the pale pink of it at once—the discharge form from her visit to the clinic. On one strip ran the bottom half of her signature—no, her forged signature: Pearl's name in her own handwriting. She had left the slip at Mia's, and Mia had transformed it for her. Lexie, touching the photo, saw that beneath the weight of the rock, the intricate net bulged but did not break. It was something she would have to carry, Mia had said to her, and for the first time, she felt that perhaps she could.

A hockey chest pad, lying in the dirt, cracked through the center, peppered with holes. Mia had used a hammer and a handful of roofing nails, driving each one through the thick white plastic like arrows, then prying it out

again. It's all right to be vulnerable, she had thought as she made each hole. It's all right to take time and see what grows. She had filled Trip's chest pad with soil and scattered seeds on it and watered it patiently for a week until from each hole, burgeoning up through the crack, came flashes of green: thin tendrils, little curling leaves worming their way up into the light. Soft fragile life emerging from within the hard shell.

A flock of miniature origami birds taking flight, the largest the size of an open palm, the smallest the size of a fingernail, all faintly striped with notepaper lines. Moody recognized them at once, even before he saw the faint crinkles that textured each one: the pages from Pearl's little notebook, which he had given and then taken back, which he had destroyed and crumpled and thrown away. Although Mia had flattened the pages, the wrinkles still rippled across the birds' wings as if the wind were ruffling their feathers. The birds lay over a photograph of sky like a scattering of petals, soaring away from a pebbled leather ground toward higher and better things. You will, too, Mia had thought as she set the birds one by one up in their paper sky.

The next photograph had begun when Mia, sweeping, found one of Mr. Richardson's collar stays under the dresser. She had kept it: he had plenty of others, a whole boxful on top of his dresser, every day tucking one into the

point of each collar to keep it stiff. Turning the little steel strip over and over between her fingers, she remembered an experiment she'd done in science class as a child. She had rubbed it with a magnet and then floated it in a dish of water, let it spin this way and that as it slowly settled with its point toward north. The resulting long exposure caught a bow-shaped blur, like the ghostly wings of a butterfly, then the bright line of the collar stay as it found its bearing and grew still. Mr. Richardson, looking at the silver arrow aligned and gleaming and certain in the clouded water, touched the collar of his shirt, wondered which way he was facing now.

And last, and to Mrs. Richardson most startling of all: a paper cutout of a birdcage, shattered, as if something very powerful inside had burst free. Looking closer, she saw it was made of newsprint. Mia had sliced each word out neatly with a razor to form the gaps between the bars. It was one of her own articles, Mrs. Richardson was sure, though with all the words gone there was no way to tell which one: the write-up of the Nature Center fund-raiser, the report on the new community colonnade, the progress of the "Citizens on Patrol" project, any one of the pieces she'd dutifully churned out over the years, any one of the stories that had, despite her intentions, built the bulk of her career. Each splintered bar bent gracefully outward, like the petal of a chrysanthemum, and in the center of

the empty cage lay one small golden feather. Something had escaped this cage. Something had found its wings. Mia, assembling this photograph, could think of no better wish for Mrs. Richardson.

They did not realize that one photo was missing until Mrs. Richardson lifted the last to reveal a bundle of negatives. The message was clear: Mia would not try to sell them; she would not share them or hold them for some future leverage. These are yours, the stack seemed to say, these are you. Do what you will with them. Inside were their portraits, inverted and reversed, all the dark made light and the light made dark. But one did not match any print in the box: Izzy had removed that print the night before, when she had come into the empty apartment and found Mia and Pearl gone and only the envelope of photos left behind as a farewell. She'd known it was hers immediately: a black rose dropped on a cracked square of pavement, the petals cut from black boot leather—her beloved boots, which had made her feel fierce, which her mother had thrown away—the outside petals from the scuffed toes, the inner, darkest petals from the tongue. A bootlace, tip fraying, stretched out long for a stem. Yellow snippets of stitching, unpicked from around the sole, to form the delicate threads of its heart. Toughness rendered tender, even beautiful. Izzy had slipped it into her bag before closing the envelope again and turning out

the lights and locking the door behind her. Her family, left with just the negative, could view only its tiny inverse: a pale flower fading to moon white within, a dark gray slab behind it like a cloudy night sky.

It was not until late that afternoon that Mr. Richardson checked the voice mail on his cell phone and got the news. In the staticky recording, Mark McCullough was sobbing so hard Mr. Richardson could barely understand him. The night before, he and Linda, both exhausted from the verdict, the press conference, the gauntlet of the entire ordeal, had fallen into the kind of sleep they hadn't had for months: deep, dreamless, and uninterrupted. In the morning they woke groggy, drunken from so much rest, and Mrs. McCullough had glanced at the clock on her nightstand and realized it was ten thirty. Mirabelle usually woke them at sunrise, crying for breakfast, for a new diaper, and she knew as soon as she saw the red numbers on the clock that something was very wrong. She had leapt from bed and run into Mirabelle's room without even putting on her slippers and her robe and Mark McCullough— still blinking in the strong morning light—had heard her screaming from the other room. The crib was empty. Mirabelle was gone.

It would be a full day before the police could piece together the clues and figure out what had happened: the unlocked sliding door to the back patio—such a safe

neighborhood, not that kind of place; the latch on the inside and out, covered with fingerprints. Bebe's absence from work; Bebe's empty apartment; and finally, a ticket, booked in Bebe's name, for a flight to Canton at 11:20 the night before. After that, there was almost no chance, the McCulloughs were told, that they could trace her. China was a large country, the inspector told them without a trace of irony. Bebe would have reached Canton by then and who knew where she might go? A needle in a haystack. You could burn all your money, he'd told them, trying to track them down.

Almost a year later—when the Richardsons' new house was nearly rebuilt, when the McCulloughs had spent not all their money, but tens of thousands of dollars, on detectives and diplomatic wranglings with little result—Mrs. McCullough and Mrs. Richardson had lunch together at the Saffron Patch. They had seen each other through the past months of turmoil as they had seen each other through decades of ups and downs, and would continue to see each other over the various hills and valleys yet to come. "Mark and I have applied to adopt a baby from China," Mrs. McCullough told Mrs. Richardson, as she scooped chicken tikka masala onto a mound of rice.

"That's wonderful," Mrs. Richardson said.

"The adoption agent says we're ideal candidates. She thinks they'll have a match for us within six months." Mrs.

McCullough took a sip of water. "She says that coming from China, the odds of the baby's family trying to regain custody are almost nil."

Mrs. Richardson leaned across the table to squeeze her old friend's hand. "That will be a very lucky baby," she said.

This was what would haunt Mrs. McCullough most: that Mirabelle hadn't cried out when Bebe had reached into the crib and lifted her up and taken her away. Despite everything—despite the homemade food and the toys and the late nights and the love, so much love, more love than Mrs. McCullough could have imagined possible—despite it all, she still had felt Bebe's arms were a safe place, a place she belonged. This next baby, she told herself, coming from an orphanage, would never have known another mother. She would be theirs without question. Already Mrs. McCullough felt dizzy with love for this child she had yet to meet. She tried not to think about Mirabelle, the daughter they'd lost, out there somewhere living some other, foreign life.

That final night, as they pulled away from the Richardsons' house, Pearl had dropped the keys into the Richardsons' mailbox with a clatter and climbed back into the car and finally voiced the question that had been clinging to the tip of her tongue.

"What if those are the pictures that were going to make you famous?"

They would not be—that would be the idea just beginning to sparkle in Mia's mind as she flicked on the headlights, a wisp of an idea, not yet coalesced into an image, let alone words. As it happened, the Richardsons would never sell those photos. They would keep them and the photos would assume the status of uneasy family heirlooms, something later generations would wonder about when at last that dusty box in the attic was found and opened: where those photographs had come from, who had made them, what they meant.

For now, Mia eased the car into first gear. "Then I'll owe them much, much more than the price of the photos." She guided the Rabbit past the duck pond, across Van Aken and the Rapid tracks, toward Warrensville Road, which would take them to the highway, out of Cleveland, and onward.

"I wish I'd had a chance to say good-bye." Pearl thought about Moody, about Lexie and Trip, the threads that still bound her to each of them in different ways. Over the years, over the course of her life, she would try repeatedly to untangle these threads, and find each time that they were hopelessly intertwined. "And Izzy. I wish I'd gotten to see her one last time."

Mia was quiet, thinking of Izzy, too. "Poor Izzy," she said at last. "She wants to get out of there so badly."

An idea began to form in Pearl's mind in wild golden loops. "We could go back and get her. I could climb up the back porch and knock on her window and—"

"My darling," Mia said, "Izzy is only fifteen. There are rules about that kind of thing."

But as the car sped down Warrensville Road and toward I-480, Mia allowed herself a brief fantasy. They would be driving down a two-lane road, some back highway, the kind Mia favored: the kind that wove its way through small towns composed of a store and a café and a gas pump. Dust would billow in the air as they went by, like golden clouds. They would come around a curve and out of that golden mist they would see a shadowy figure by the roadside, arm out, one thumb up. Mia would slow the car and as the dust settled they would see her hair first, a billow of gold on gold, recognizing that wild hair, that golden wildness, even before they saw her face, even before they could stop and fling the door wide and let her in.

Saturday morning, as Mia and Pearl crossed into Iowa, Izzy—the smell of smoke still clinging, faintly, to her hair—climbed aboard a Greyhound bus headed for Pittsburgh. Across town her family was just now gathering on the bank of the duck pond, watching the firefighters douse the Richardson house, flame by flame. She had, folded in her back pocket, an address she had found in her mother's files, which she had rifled through late the previous night, after packing her bag. George and Regina Wright. Bethel Park, Pennsylvania. There had been a phone number, too, but Izzy knew a phone call would not give her the answers she needed. The file on her mother's desk—neatly labeled M.W. in her mother's careful writing—had been quite full, and she had read everything, sitting in the lamplight in her mother's office chair, while everyone slept quietly upstairs. Below the Wrights' address she'd copied another: Anita Rees, the Rees Gallery. It was somewhere in New York City. Mia, she knew, had started there when she was not much older than Izzy. She wondered what it would be like.

Maybe one of these people would help her find Mia, wherever she might be headed. Maybe they would send her back to her parents. And if they did? She would leave again. She would leave again and again until she was old enough that no one could send her back. She would keep searching until she found what she was looking for. Pittsburgh beckoned, and beyond it, New York: Mia's past, but her future. They would lead her to Mia somehow.

Now, settling into a seat and leaning her head against the window, she imagined how it would go. She would spot Mia from behind first—but of course she would recognize her immediately. Izzy knew her outline like a shape she'd traced over and over until she knew it by heart. She would find Mia and when Mia turned she would open her arms, she would take Izzy in and take her with her, wherever she would go next.

That last night, as Mrs. Richardson settled down to sleep in the Winslow house for the first time, she began to think, as she would for a long time, of her youngest child. The noises of the house were foreign to her—the hum of the fridge, the faint rumble of the furnace downstairs, the squeak of a branch rubbing the slate roof overhead—and she rose and went outside and sat on the steps of the little duplex, her bathrobe wrapped tightly around her. Under her feet the cement stoop was cool and slightly damp, as if a fog had just lifted.

All day long she had been fuming at Izzy, both internally and aloud. Ungrateful child, she had said. How could she do this. What she wasn't going to do when they found her. She would be grounded for life. She would be sent to boarding school. Military school. A convent. She had half a mind to let the police have her: let her learn about consequences in jail. Her husband and children, used to her flares of fury at Izzy, nodded quietly, let her rant. But this was different from other times. This time Izzy had crossed every line, and now—each member of the family was slowly realizing—she might never be back.

The police were searching for Izzy, of course; they'd put out an alert for her as a runaway and a possibly endangered child, and in the days to come Mrs. Richardson would give them photos for bulletins and posters, would track Izzy's friends and classmates one by one, searching

for clues about where she might have gone. But the ones who might have known, she realized, had already gone. All up and down the street the houses looked like any others—but inside them were people who might be happy, or taking refuge, or steeling themselves to go out into the world, searching for something better. So many lives she would never know about, unfolding behind those doors.

It was nearly midnight, and a car drove down Winslow quickly, its high beams on, as if it had somewhere important to be, then disappeared into the darkness. She probably looked crazy to the neighbors, she thought, sitting out there on the steps in the dark, but for once she did not care. The anger she had stoked all day had burned away, like the heat of the afternoon burning off as evening fell, leaving her with one thought, cold and crystalline and piercing as a star: Izzy was gone. Everything that had infuriated her about Izzy, even before she'd taken her first breath, had been rooted in that one fear, that she might lose her. And now she had. A thin wail rose from her throat, sharp as the blade of a knife.

For the first time, her heart began to shatter, thinking of her child out there among the world. Izzy: that child who had caused her so much trouble, who had worried her so much, who had never stopped worrying her and worrying at her, whose restless energy had driven her, at last, to take flight. That child who she thought had

been her opposite but who had, deep inside, inherited and carried and nursed that spark her mother had long ago tamped down, that same burning certainty that she knew right from wrong. She thought, as she would often for many years, of the photograph from that day, with the one golden feather inside it: Was it a portrait of her, or her daughter? Was she the bird trying to batter its way free, or was she the cage?

The police would find Izzy, she told herself. They would find her and she would be able to make amends. She wasn't sure how, but she was certain she would. And if the police couldn't find her? Then she would look for Izzy herself. For as long as it took, for forever if need be. Years might pass and they might change, both of them, but she was sure she would still know her own child, just as she would know herself, no matter how long it had been. She was certain of this. She would spend months, years, the rest of her life looking for her daughter, searching the face of every young woman she met for as long as it took, searching for a spark of familiarity in the faces of strangers.