LITTLE

FIRES

EVERYWHERE

ALSO BY CELESTE NG Everything I Never Told You

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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

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veryone 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

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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 puttered 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.

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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 behindthough 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

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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 $I_{\chi\chi}$ ". 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.

he 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—puttered 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—