Three Generations, One Cookbook, and One DNA:

Reflection of the Past in Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*.

It is one thing for one’s daughter to die, it’s another thing to find out the cause and realize one was part of it. *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng is about a biracial Asian-American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. James and his wife, Marilyn, had different upbringings that resulted into a conflicting style of parenting. While James wanted his favorite child, Lydia, to have many friends and live an enviable social life, Marilyn wanted her to be different and also become a doctor. As the story unfolds, Ng describes the impact this had in the life of Lydia and her other two siblings.

The first sentence in the book is “Lydia is dead” (Ng 1). The subsequent chapters then discussed in details what led to this unfortunate occurrence. Marilyn was very passionate about finding out everything she never knew about her daughter’s death. In this very interesting scene, Marilyn again checks out Lydia’s room as she had always done since her death. This time she decides to destroy everything that reminds her of what her daughter could have been. As she stomps all the science books on the floor, she comes across the big red cookbook. Could this be the same cookbook Lydia told her long time ago that she lost? In bewilderment, Marilyn opens the book and all the pencil marks her mother, Doris, had made were still there. It was then clear to her that the cookbook had something to do with everything that had happened. The cookbook although talks about food and how to make them, is really like DNA transpiring through the lives of Marilyn and Lydia, molding them to reflect the past.
The cookbook originally belongs to Doris, Lydia’s grandmother. Although Lydia never met her grandmother, she had in her possession something that symbolized her presence. The first time Ng introduced the cookbook was when Marilyn went to Doris’ house. Eight years had passed since Marilyn saw her mother, and this time the only reason she is back to her house is because she is dead. Doris was very particular about *keeping house*, baking a perfect pie, and she wanted to raise her daughter with such potential. Marilyn, however, did not appreciate all her mother’s effort because she wanted to become a doctor. As she searches through her mother’s house in case there was anything worth keeping, she finds the cookbook in the kitchen. Marilyn opens it only for her to read same words her mother had read to her years back. As reiterated in the pages of the cookbook Marilyn opened to, she reads “if you care about pleasing a man—bake a pie. But make sure it’s a perfect pie. The man you marry will know the way he likes his eggs…so it behooves a good wife to know how to make an egg behave in six basic ways” (Ng 82). How could it be that Marilyn’s life was nothing different from what her mother had wanted? Marilyn realizes that she hadn’t achieved any of her big dreams and might end up like her mother. To Marilyn, her mother lived a small life which she describes as the “furthest thing she could imagine…where sewing a neat hem was a laudable accomplishment and removing beet stains from a blouse was cause for celebration” (Ng 30). The similarities between her life and Doris’ scared her so much she furiously took the cookbook just so it could motivate her never to end up like her mother. This time, she wanted to go back to medical school and achieve her dream. Her decision was therefore influenced by the cookbook whose role was simply to replicate the *small life* previous generation lived.

Lydia’s first contact with her grandmother’s cookbook was the beginning of sad, innocent promises she made. She found the cookbook in the kitchen where her mother left it.
Marilyn left for medical school without telling her husband and her children. This, of course, got them very worried but there was little they could do. Maybe if Marilyn had taken the cookbook with her, Lydia’s life would have been spared? But it was too late as Lydia opened the cookbook and read lines like “what mother doesn’t love to cook with her little girl? And what little girl doesn’t love learning with mom? (Ng 136). That was the moment Lydia assumed her mother left because she had not been the little girl. She assumed her mother was angry and had cried over the same pages. If only she knew her mother left for a different reason, the promises she made would have been less toxic. Truth be told, Marilyn is a good cook. This is because while she was missing, her son Nathan expressed his longing for her food saying “‘When is mom coming back home?’” His mother had been gone for nearly a week, and he longed for hard-boiled eggs again” (Ng 87). That was what Marilyn wanted to avoid such that when she is gone, her children would not remember her for just being a good cook, but something worthy like a doctor. Lydia, on the other hand, is ready to make things right with her mother if she ever came back. She promised to “do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted” (Ng 137). As innocent as these promise were, it changed her life forever. When her mother finally came back home, Lydia couldn’t afford to let her see the cookbook again and so with apprehension she confessed, “‘While you were gone. Your cookbook.’” She swallowed. “‘I—lost it’” (Ng 147). Well, Marilyn didn’t come back home because of her family, she came back home because she was pregnant with her third child, Hannah. Because of the pregnancy, her dream of becoming a doctor was aborted. So instead of being upset that her daughter lost the cookbook, she was glad that her daughter detested it and wanted more. The collision of Lydia’s promise with her mother’s aborted dream wouldn’t have happened if both of them never read the cookbook in the first place.
Later in the novel, it’s revealed that Lydia did not lose the cookbook. She kept it in her room under heavy science books that her mother bought for her. Even though she was struggling to get good grades in science classes, she still kept to the promise of making her mother happy, until a limit was reached. At this point, we shall examine the peculiarities of the cookbook and why it’s likened to DNA. How could a book that talks about food be passed from Doris to Marilyn to Lydia and end up influencing their lives? DNA, an acronym for Deoxy Ribonucleic Acid, does exact same thing. It contains genetic information passed from parents to offspring. This information is important for expression and important for molding present generation to reflect the past ones. The cookbook served this very purpose because the idea of living a small life kept recurring. Marilyn that could have become a doctor ended up as a wife and good cook, just like her mother. Lydia is dead, just like her grandmother. Even more sadly, Lydia ended up not becoming a wife, mother, cook or a doctor. What a small life indeed!

In a story titled “Our Secret”, Susan Griffin explained some very interesting features about DNA which illuminate parts of *Everything I Never Told you*. She says the life plan of the body is encoded in the DNA molecule, a substance that has the ability to hold information and to replicate itself” (Griffin 340). She went further to introduce the character of Heinrich Himmler, who lived a life similar to his fore-fathers. As a child, Heinrich was trained never to express his weak emotions in his diary. With this built-up rigidity, Heinrich becomes the Reichsfuhrer SS, President of Bavarian police. He uses his authority to order the killing of millions of people and even buys a mobile killing truck to ease the job of the killers. Was Heinrich destined to be hostile or was it his choice? Griffin revealed that “Johann, Heinrich’s grandfather, was a sergeant in the royal police force of Bavaria ... a heroic soldier” (308). Same goes for his father, Gebhard, who was known to be rigid as a young man and taught Heinrich to be prudish. It is therefore more
likely that Heinrich was destined to be a serial killer. But at what point in his life did his choice outweigh the cruelty running in his veins? Griffin claims that “One is never allowed to see the effects of what one does. But ignorance is not entirely passive. For some blindness becomes a kind of refuge, a way of life chosen” (325). It is then true that Heinrich made a choice “to be a soldier. And above all he wants a uniform” (Griffin 310). This goes to mean that not all expressions are accounted for by DNA. The smallness of Marilyn’s and Lydia’s lives is not entirely associated with the cookbook either.

As important and powerful DNA is, there are factors that control its expression. These factors could be internal or external. Rachel Rettner defines Epigenetics “as external modifications that turn off or turn on DNA” (n. p). An example of epigenetics is chromatin condensation that leads to silencing of a gene. For purposes of understanding epigenetics in Everything I Never Told You, we would consider things Marilyn and Lydia did that turned off or turned on what the cookbook represented in their lives. One of the reasons Marilyn quit medical school the first time was because she was pregnant. This prompted her marriage to James earlier than the time they were supposed to. If not for the pregnancy, Marilyn could have become a doctor. Even at her second attempt to go back to medical school, it was her third pregnancy that stopped her. The cookbook didn’t cause all these to happen, but they are factors that contributed to its manifestation. At the time Nathan pushed his sister, Lydia into water unintentionally, while he felt guilty, Lydia had “felt relief so great she had sighed in a deep choking lungful…she had staggered so readily, fell so eagerly”(Ng 154). The feeling of being drowned in the water the first time was a catalyst to Lydia’s option of going out to the lake the night she died. The gravity of living to her parent’s expectations could only disappear when she was under water. Had Nathan known that Lydia would hold on to the drowning-feeling, he wouldn’t have let it happen in the
first place. Lydia’s love life was also frustrating especially when Jack, her boyfriend, confessed
that he likes Nathan instead. Jack says to her “‘He matters to me’” (Ng268). Although it took
Lydia to process his statement, she was sad that her effort to live a life she was pleased with
proved futile. All these and many more indicate that the cookbook although influenced living a
small life, it is not totally responsible for it. It is just rather unfortunate that there was no external
modification that turned off what the cookbook designated.

Marilyn and Lydia successfully reflected the kind of life past generation lived—the type
that portrayed no laudable accomplishments. This insight was all Marilyn needed as she read
through the cookbook again. It was too late for her to go back to medical school for the third
time. More sadly, it was too late to raise Lydia from the dead. She acknowledges all her mistakes
and with tears in her eyes she admits, “perhaps—and this thought chokes her—that had dragged
Lydia underwater at last” (Ng 247). Shortly after that statement, Hannah shows up at the door as
if she was presenting her mother a second chance to make things right. Although she hesitated,
Marilyn pleaded for her to stay and she says “please come back, let me start over” (Ng 248).
Hopefully, this would be the decision that would turn off the cookbook’s mission of replicating a
small life in future generations, starting with Hannah. Nonetheless, by viewing Marilyn’s and
Lydia’s relationship in *Everything I Never Told You* through the lens of epigenetics, we not only
learn how behaviors can be passed on but also how behaviors can be modified.
Works Cited


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