

First Place Winner, Level III

Sandy Shen

Letter to author Celeste Ng concerning her novel *Little Fires Everywhere*

Every once in a while, I want to ask my mother, “Do you wish your life was different?” But I already know the answer: “Life has already happened. What is the point in regretting something that you can’t change.”

That’s how she’s always been: fiercely independent, wise, and patient. She would let me cry and whine about hiccups and spilled milk, but I always knew when I should stop and move on (not that I always did, though). Maybe that is why I felt so confused about Mia Warren; I wasn’t sure what to make of her. It wasn’t because she was a nomadic artist or a caring mother; it was that she was so dynamically *both*. I wasn’t accustomed to that—seeing a woman as more than a one-dimensional mother, worker, or daughter. I had missed a major step in understanding the people around me: that they are complex people with pasts and thoughts and lives.

It was Mia Warren who woke me up from my self-absorbed reverie. After Pearl was conceived—with Mia as a surrogate mother—Mia’s life changed direction. She was no longer a struggling photographer working questionable jobs to survive art school; she was a mother of a fragile being whose every breath demanded her complete and utmost attention. And she took these burdens in stride, raising a precocious, genuine, and sympathetic daughter.

Yet the part of her character that struck me the most was Mia’s stubborn individuality. Unlike Elena Richardson, who defined herself on the basis of her picture-perfect family in the suburbs, Mia shaped motherhood to suit her dreams and situation. Unlike Elena Richardson, who extinguished her dreams of high-profile journalism in order to comply with social norms and familial expectations, Mia continued curating breathtaking photographs and fashioning her own creative path. Unlike Elena Richardson, who lived for the sake of appearances and conformity, Mia lived however she wanted regardless of society’s confines. Perfect foils for one another, they reflect the dark worries and questions I have for my mother as I glance through her yellowed photos. Who is the sallow-looking waitress in a 1989 restaurant? Who is this woman with crow’s feet creases and a sweet smile in her eyes? Who is this muse looking across the waters at a grainy statue masked by haze? What did she expect from her life, ten, twenty, thirty years ago? But the photographers’ film coverings have always sealed parts of her from me because for all the questions I have asked, so many have been met with a distracted wave of the hand and a noncommittal sigh.

I want to know my mother for all that she is, because all I have known is a cookie-cutter figure: dutiful, loving, and responsible. I know there is another side to this woman, vibrant and real but hidden beneath the burdens and responsibilities of adulthood. I can see her sometimes, in the small collection of pretty clothes that she buys but never wears, the battered nursing textbooks she stows in the basement, the girlish, decades-old letters from friends overseas, the laughing, jovial conversations with old friends. Yet that side of her remains elusive and shy, preferring to stay behind the smokescreen of my mother’s memory. Here I find a startling resemblance to Pearl, Mia’s treasure daughter, who has never wondered about the past of a

person so constant, so essential to her life. We both never fathomed the complexity, the struggles, and the vitality of the women in our lives.

Because at first glance, my mother and Elena both checked off the requirements of the traditional female archetype as housewives successfully raising multiple children soon to be shipped off to college. Yet I know they couldn't be more different as mothers and people. Tied down by immaculate appearances and never-ending expectations, Elena Richardson is a mother whose expectations I would crumble under: however rich in ability and knowledge, she is so limited in her compassion and understanding of others. All she has ever known in life are white picket fences and endless brownstones, so she harshly scrutinizes those who incinerate the foundations of conventional society. Not even her own daughter Izzy, a wild, fiery girl, can meet her mother's inexorable expectations. On the other hand, my mother grew up as the only daughter of multiple sons and knew how to cook and clean from a young age: her weary knees and stiff fingers speak more than enough for her. So while many conventional values persist in her ways of thinking, she pushes all of us, her children, to strongly stand by what matters to *us*—not what society or typical tiger-moms demand. Regardless of whatever arbitrary standards society has set as the parameters for success, my mother has been a wild success, learning English alongside medical terminology, setting aside money for her parents back home, and raising independent children who value morals, education, and wisdom. If that isn't a success story, I don't know what is.

It is through *Little Fires Everywhere* that I realized the kind of parent I want to be. For most of my life, I have been afraid of motherhood and everything it holds. The idea of raising a child, from the moment it takes its first breath outside the womb to the moment I take my last, is terrifying. Sometimes, all I can do is look at my mother and marvel at the universality and enduring presence of a mother's love, of the titanium bond tying a mother and child together beyond the limits of time itself.

I remember the cozy folk tales about foxes and grapes that my mother would recite when we were but a little taller than her knees and the steaming clothes (fresh from the dryer) that she would dump on me and my sisters during the icy winters. My mother gave—and continues to give—us all little memories that bring us warmth during chilly times, regardless of time or place.

But I also think of all the worry, the appreciation, and the strain that comes with children. I think of all the times when I have said cruel, horrible things to my mother and how her face contorted in response. I think of my naiveté and ignorance as a child, sheltered by the wings of my mother's care and worry. I think of all the opportunities she has given up that we may never know or recognize. And I think, “Will I ever be able to be a mother? To be as independent as Mia but as devoted as Elena? To be anything like my mother?”

Before I read *Little Fires Everywhere*, I was wary, skeptical of parenthood. What could be so rewarding, so beautiful about raising children that makes parenthood worth every moment of pain and sadness? What is so sweet about getting up in the dead of morning to coddle a screaming infant? What could be the source of a parent's relentless patience in times of never-ending frustration and miscommunication?

For all the questions and issues you felt unanswered in *Little Fires Everywhere*, you answered a few that I had thought were unanswerable. From the beginning, I should have never expected there to be a clear, cogent answer to my confusion. After reading and rereading about the lives of your wonderfully vibrant characters, I realized that all of the women in your story understand the hurricane of joy and worry that is motherhood; that it ultimately settles into a long, laborious sigh of sweet and steady relief that keeps mother and child coursing along. Through rocky seas and quiet stills, the sacred bond flows past time, past words, past translation. This, not short lived electric lust, is the true love we seek for the rest of our lives. Thank you for not only teaching me to fear a little less, but to also love a little more.

Sincerely,
Sandy Shen