

The death of their child leads James and Marilyn to reflect on their lives. James, the academically gifted child of Chinese immigrants, spent his life yearning to belong. He met Marilyn in 1957 when he was a doctoral candidate at Harvard teaching a class on American culture in which she was a student. After graduation, James failed to secure a faculty position at Harvard, so accepted an offer from the fictional Middlewood College in Ohio. Marilyn grew up disgusted by her homemaker mother (who taught home economics in her high school) and longed to become a doctor. When she met James and recognized the racist treatment he had been enduring, Marilyn felt a kinship with him and the two began an affair. Discovering she was pregnant, she arranged for a quick marriage to James and was angry when her mother tried to stop the wedding after seeing that James is of Asian descent.