

Indigo Cates Surfacing

The day Indigo Cates found Alta Osterman's grand-daughter floating face down in Alta's swimming pool Indigo knew her sister, Celeste, had put a curse on her. From the day she was old enough to realize she was the youngest, Indigo fought to keep up, to try grown-up-girl things, to be better than Celeste. Those accomplishments escaped Indigo, but the nagging need for approval pushed her to keep trying and drove Celeste crazy.

Celeste whined that Indigo got to do much more at a younger age than she had.

Indigo was sure this wasn't true; she did get to tag along with Celeste doing things ordinarily off limits. Like the day she and Celeste rode the city bus home from swimming practice. For Indigo it was an adventure. For Celeste it was the burden of responsibility for the little sister she loved, but couldn't stand.

"Celeste keep your sister close. Get off at the Warson Road stop. And don't talk to strangers," their mother warned.

"What's the big deal?" Indigo whispered to Celeste, piqued by the undercurrents of distaste and worry Indigo recognized in her mother's voice.

“Why did I have to be the older sister?” Celeste pleaded to an invisible force she looked for in the ceiling with a face pinched and puckered like an old crab-apple doll. She exhaled a prolonged breath rank with the sorrow of a person being forced to take one step into the First Circle, a place their dad often referenced with exaggerated horror and neither girl understood.

Despite the drama it was Celeste who calmed Indigo when they deposited their nickels and dimes in the bus meter, and Indigo noticed the only other riders on the bus where black. She shuddered and did a double-take.

“It’s okay,” Celeste reassured and guided Indigo to a row of seats in the middle of the bus. Then Celeste launched into a low-volume explanation of breast-feeding when one woman maneuvered a pendulous breast between two open buttons of a shirt-waist dress and nestled a blanketed bundle against it. Celeste pushed Indigo forward, guided her down the three steps and off the bus at the right stop all the while hissing under her breath: “Don’t stare.”

Some days Indigo thought she deserved to be cursed.

Five years separated them. The harder Indigo tried to please her sister, the more distant Celeste became. She built an impenetrable barrier of resentment. She declared Indigo a failure every chance she could and seasoned her words with bitter gusto. “In Di Go.” Celeste enunciated every syllable with the staccato of a jackhammer.

Indigo wished Celeste would use her nickname. Just once. Indie. Babyish yes, but she had heard her mother call it “endearing.” Even Celeste couldn’t make it sound like verbal assault.

“You will never be me. Poor In Di Go. Never a cheerleader. Too big boned. Too flat chested. Never a prom queen.”

Indigo hated when Celeste said her name like that, seething with the same rage and disgust she heard in her Dad’s voice when he told Mom to “Go. To. Hell.”

Indigo looked in the mirror and saw, not what was real, but what she heard in Celeste’s daily rants. Her shoulders were too broad, her hair, so thin a pink streak of scalp lit up when the water parted it, and her feet, fat and fleshy, were good for nothing but swimming. Her feet belonged on a seal, not in her sister’s demure sling-backed pumps. When Indigo tried them on, her heels oozed over the backs. She staggered around in them until her she rolled on the ankle she hurt running a race with her true love of the third grade.

“On a seal. Not in heels,” Celeste taunted. “Leave my shoes alone or I’ll behead your Barbie.”

The mantra about her feet stayed in Indigo’s head. She splayed open hands over her chest in hopes of finding the same bumps Celeste had cultivated in the past year. Indigo wept. Her tears poised for a moment beneath her eyes, glistened, and then dissolved down her cheeks. She had a better chance of turning into a mermaid than she did of earning her sister’s love.

Indigo played with two cylindrical magnets at school. If the wrong ends got together, a palpable force pushed them apart and sent them spinning. She understood that repellant power. Loneliness crowded the place where she thought her stomach should be. No one seemed to notice when sadness relegated Indigo to a self-imposed seclusion.

Efforts to emulate her sister were not appreciated. Indigo knew some of her behavior looked ridiculous. Nail polish applied to the misshapen surface of well-chewed nails looked like pieces of a jigsaw. Kleenex fell out of her orange one-piece play suit. Who knew you needed a bra to hold things in place? Oh how she wanted to be like Celeste, except for the scar on her left jaw.

The scar recreated the family crest embedded with diamond chips on Dad's pinkie ring. Dad backhanded Celeste the day, as a joke, she dumped ice water on him when he had fallen asleep in the bathtub. Indigo could count on one hand, not including her thumb, the number of times he spanked her.

When Celeste told stories of being beaten by their father, it stirred the same part of Indigo's brain that stored, for future reference, memories of Celeste's teasing. The worst punishment Indigo ever suffered was the nauseating rap on her fingernails when she slid her hand between her buttocks and Dad's yardstick. He never hit her with his hand. Indigo wondered if Celeste tallied the inequities. So many reasons for Celeste to wreak havoc with Indigo's life.

Water provided an escape. Indigo loved the water. Once she was big enough to be the third leg of a winning eight-and-under relay, she bonded with the water and loved to immerse herself in its gentle undulation. The water possessed an all-encompassing human touch. It muffled the exterior sounds from around the pool and provided the solace of solitude. She loved to practice in that purity every day. No one wore swim goggles back then. The chlorine stung her eyes. After the last cool down lap, she pinched her thigh just enough to make her eyes water. Tears washed out the chlorine and eased the burn. A slight

irritation persisted, so when Indigo left practice she entered a charmed world where fluorescent lights surrounded everything in rainbows.

The pool was clean and safe. Sounds echoed around the natatorium, and she sometimes heard things people said on the other side of the pool. If she took one of the metal lane hooks and tapped it on one end of the pool, a teammate could hear it on the other. In contrast to the shape-shifting outlines of things viewed underwater, the water transmitted crisp, clear sounds. There was no place else like the pool. In the water, she floated with a lightness she wished her spirit had.

Three pools filled Alta Osterman's back yard. She operated a summer swimming camp where no child finished camp without being able to swim one lap. Indigo always swam in the biggest pool. She was on the same team as Alta's son, Buddy. The families spent time with each other away from the frantic atmosphere of practices and meets. When her family visited with Buddy's, the adults allowed Indigo to swim by herself; the pool wasn't that deep. If she stood on the bottom on her tiptoes with her hands over her head, her fingertips breached the surface of the water. She exhaled every bit of air, defied her buoyancy with a storm of bubbles, and walked through the water in slow motion.

The day she scooped the body from the pool, Indigo played in the water: no sprints, no timer, nothing but aimless fun. She swam laps, not butterfly, her best stroke, backstroke, or the crawl. She imagined herself a dolphin, slicing through the water, diving and coasting to freedom in the ocean. She jettisoned herself from the bottom of the pool and burst into the air with a thrust of her hips and a splash. She spouted water that spread in a plume of mist. She honked like the dolphin on television and swept her arms across the

surface creating a halo of waves. Then she dived to the bottom of the pool and listened for the water to speak. But Indigo believed the power of the water lay in its motion, not its noise.

While Indigo swam, Celeste, Buddy, and his little niece stayed inside. If she couldn't have Buddy to herself, Indigo preferred to swim alone. She didn't want to compete with Celeste for Buddy's attention or be seen as Celeste's object of ridicule. Indigo regretted not asking to borrow Celeste's new transistor radio. Music provided better company than the wistful susurrus of the water.

Her Dad taught her to swim. She never remembered not being able to swim or having any fear of the water. She felt safe in the cool isolation. She drifted along the light blue sloping cement with an occasional, half kick of her legs. She looked up through the water and see trees and clouds and deck chairs stretch and bend in impossible postures. The bottom of the pool felt private. The water melded with her body. In that moment, Indigo felt beautiful, capable of a grace she didn't believe she could manage out of the pool.

In Alta's pool, Indigo could push off from one end, and using a lazy breaststroke, reach the other without surfacing. She glided along and the shadow that followed, her shadow, became a shape-shifting menace trying to catch her. She talked to the shadow. Like the water, it never spoke to her. The silence and the pressure building up in her lungs pushed Indigo to hurry to the other end of the pool. She erupted from the water and floated on her back. Lines of gold snaked across the water. The sun turned her cheeks pink. The thought of more dreaded freckles made her dive to the bottom again.

During one pass along the bottom, Indigo noticed a ball, white with a crinkled outline and big as a head of cabbage. It bobbed in one corner of the pool. She hadn't thrown anything in, no toys, no kickboard, and certainly no floats. She didn't need floats. Maybe her towel had blown into the water. She knew the water distorted things so she kept swimming.

Indigo hoped maybe Buddy had grown tired of Celeste and had come outside to spend some time with her. Indigo loved Buddy. He made her appreciate that different boys filled a racer's skimpy nylon racing suit in different ways. Whether skin tight or creased from being too big, the shine of the fabric suggested details of things Indigo had never seen, and at her age, only imagined. These details mattered to the older girls, to Celeste, and thus to Indigo.

Celeste knew how Indigo felt about Buddy Osterman. In an effort to make Celeste realize they were not that different, Indigo had confessed her feelings, even though his ears stuck out enough to slow him down in the water. Even though he wiped his face and dropped snot in the pool. When Celeste laughed as hard as Indigo had ever seen, Indigo thought they found a common ground.

What a fool she had been. Celeste committed the ultimate act of betrayal. One day Celeste flirted with Buddy until he grinned like an ape, bits of bread stuck in the crevices of teeth he hadn't brushed in days. She bewitched him with the special power of her changing body. She timed it perfectly, after practice, while they waited for their respective rides home. Buddy stood in his swim suit and a t-shirt he had out grown. He stammered and blushed and his ears turned cherry red. But what Indigo noticed, what impressed her the

most, was the way Buddy's suit puffed up like a marshmallow over hot coals when it swelled, crusted, and burst, dripping molten white sweetness into the fire.

Indigo treaded water, floated back against the wall, and pushed. This time, she stayed on the surface with a rolling stroke. With one arm, she pulled forward and rolled on her back; with the other, she propelled herself through the water and rolled onto her stomach. She looked for a glimpse of Buddy's red suit on the pool deck, but only saw her towel draped over the back of a canvas captain's chair.

The blur in the pool drifted out of the corner bouncing in the waves of Indigo's wake. She continued to play. Back and forth she glided through the water. It tickled and trespassed upon every wrinkle on her body. Cupping her hand, she scooped the water and pulled herself forward. When she kicked, the water exploded in a misty curtain of color. She passed the floating ball, and this time noticed a patch of pink. She finished her lap, but when she pushed off the wall, she drew her head up and paddled over to the thing.

She thought it was a doll. One of the campers might have left it behind. But the hair floated in harmony with the water. Synthetic, kinky curls resisted the pull of the water. It was short, blond, and conformed to the water's motion, fluttering in the ripples caused by Indigo's approach. She saw a line of pink in the scalp, just like hers. Each arm bent at right angles from the body. The legs weren't rigid like a doll's. They floated and rocked with the water. The feet were bare. Indigo counted ten perfect toes. Indigo's dolls didn't have toes, because their shoes were painted on, shiny black Mary Jane's with straps across the instep. The shoes never came off her dolls. A tremor of fear chased up Indigo's spine.

Indigo reached out and touched the doll. Cold surged through her fingertips, her arm, into her heart. Her hand drew back. She knew the difference between a doll and human flesh. So pale pink. So resilient. Not hard. The hair floated like seaweed because it *was* hair, not a nest of nylon gold. The child's diaper was covered by white lacy panties embroidered with blue trim. The head dipped beneath the water like Indigo's did when she was looking for a penny she had thrown in the pool.

Indigo knew she should get the child out of the water. But she didn't want to get in trouble; she didn't want to be blamed. She tread water, searched the side of the pool, the back yard, and the porch for a grown-up. *Alone*. How she so often wished to be. How she so often ended up. *Not now*. She reached for the body. Her legs pumped; her mind shut down. She surrendered to instinct. Urgency stopped her sense of time. Crazy thoughts flew through her head: where she left her favorite stuffed bear, how her best friend's mouse died in Indigo's care, how she peed in her pants walking home from school one day.

Indigo flipped the body, face up. It didn't look at the sun, the clouds, or the chaotic path of a dragonfly buzzing over the pool. Although the mouth was open, no sound escaped, nor did it draw in a breath. Pallid lips formed a passive "o" in an expression of surprise. Sightless eyes revealed no sign of awareness. Indigo worked her legs in a circular motion, keeping her head and shoulders above the water. The muscles in her legs cried for relief. She extended her arms with the body across them.

"The baby's fallen in! Help! Come quick! The baby's fallen in." She kept screaming the same thing, without knowing how many times she called, not knowing when her hollering turned to a raspy whisper. She never stopped pumping her legs and kept the

margins the flaccid face from sinking below the water's surface. Indigo didn't notice Celeste run up to the side of the pool. Indigo focused on the child in her arms, the burn in her legs, and a silent prayer of redemption.

Celeste leaned over the water. "Give her to me."

Indigo kept churning her legs. Her mouth moved without a sound. Despite her time in the sun, a pallor transformed her cheeks to pasty luminescence.

"Indigo." Celeste yelled. "Give her to me."

Indigo kicked until she touched the side of the pool. Celeste lifted Alta's granddaughter from Indigo's arms.

Without the weight of the body, Indigo realized she no longer felt her arms.

"How long has she been in?" The child flopped in Celeste's grip.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I don't know."

When she competed, Indigo could recite her personal best for every race she entered, but she could not answer Celeste, could not tell her the one thing that might help save this life and connect the two sisters forever. Indigo slammed a fist into the water. The surface simply opened and swallowed her anger. How many times had she swum by the thing in the pool? Why hadn't she stopped? If something bad happened, it would be her fault. If? Something bad *had* happened.

Celeste held the toddler upside down. Water cascaded from her nose and mouth.

Indigo didn't believe a tiny child could hold so much water and still have space inside for a shred of life. She looked at the stringy blond hair pressed against pale blue skin. She watched Celeste placed her mouth over the inanimate face. When had Celeste learned to do that? For a moment, Indigo wished it was she her sister fought to revive. Celeste hugged the child, covered its mouth with a macabre kiss, and breathed in shallow, repetitive puffs. Indigo believed she watched an act of love. Not the kind of love she felt for Buddy, something more pure and purposeful. Even if she had to die, Indigo wished to trade places. She ached to receive not just the breath of life, but the recognition of her existence from her sister.

Indigo drifted from the edge of the pool. Her body sank into the watery tomb of escape leaving behind a trail bubbles. With her arms over her head, she paddled her hands, a gesture just like a prom queen waving to a crowd. *If only I had paid more attention.*

In the seclusion of the water, Indigo wanted to feel what it had done to the child. She needed to know the truth about her water, that it could be cruel, that it could summon breathlessness and fear. She prayed that with surrender, the water might provide comfort. With her hands waving, she pushed herself down to sit Indian style on the bottom of the pool. In the dark circle of her shadow, the water cloaked her. Holding her breath, Indigo ignored the burn in her lungs, fought the natural buoyancy of her body, and stayed submerged in her own shame.

Indigo didn't hear the wail of the child when air rushed in and out of her lungs. Through the lens of the water, she watched Celeste hand Alta's grand-daughter over to a

faceless adult. Then Celeste's hands gestured in frantic circles. Round and round they went like she was pulling something toward her.

Indigo had no idea what it meant, but she couldn't hold her breath much longer. If only she knew the secret to pleasing her sister. She closed her eyes and floated to the surface. When she dunked her head back to get the hair out of her face, she heard Celeste chattering. The words flowed. No pause. No deliberate enunciation.

Indigo heard excitement in Celeste's voice.

"Indie. Indie. How did you hold her up so long? We saved her. You saved her."

The child's crying harmonized with Indigo's laughter. She swam to the side of the pool and grabbed Celeste's extended hand. Indigo turned her head and admired how wavelets textured the water. "Thank-you."

