

## Celestial Body

Maybe what's wrong with me is exactly what Momma says: a mind too busy and a mouth too often kept shut. "You could've made him stay, you know," she says, "if you'd have made him feel guilty." Other days it's "Smart girls say no." I am not a smart girl. If I were, I would've moved out of Momma's place already, found somewhere cheap and quiet where everyone keeps their mouths shut because everyone is me.

Momma and I sit in the living room folding laundry. There are five piles for the five of us, but she keeps holding things up and looking to me, unsure of which pile it belongs to. She lifts a black and yellow *Steelers* shirt and scans it up and down, front and back, like it might have a name.

"Lisa's," I tell her, and she nods like she knew.

"When did y'all get so many damn clothes?" she asks. I don't point out the holes in the armpits. "The baby will need clothes," she says, "and I suppose we need to figure out where to put her." Eight months in and Momma is finally thinking about these things. Behind her the TV sells us wonderfoam that can soak up a mess in less than five seconds.

"You don't want her in your room?" I ask. Momma glances toward the kitchen where Pete is smoking a cigarette and playing solitaire.

"Pete thinks he can build a third room, you and the girls won't have to share."

I've heard Pete talking about this, the third room, talking and measuring the walls but we both know he won't get around to it because Pete doesn't get around to anything. Instead he gets what Momma calls "sad," and sometimes we don't see him for a week. All we hear is Momma cooing to him through the walls, trying to get him up.

"Well, there sure isn't room for a crib," I say.

"You know," Momma says, "I was your age when I got pregnant, too. And I didn't have no damn family to build me rooms and buy me clothes." She shakes her head. "Besides, we don't need a crib. Baby sleeps in the bed, with you."

Around Momma's neck is a moon pendant with a name engraved on it—Celeste—and this is what she's declared will be my daughter's name.

"Cribs are a tiny prison," Momma continues, "babies need contact, skin, human bodies," and she smacks her forearm. I am about to ask what happens when she's too big to share a bed, but Mickey comes traipsing out of our room, and I let it go. At nine years old Mickey is the youngest of the house, and she hoists herself onto the couch between me and Momma. She holds up a book she got from school and points to pictures of giant red orbs.

"You know these stars blow up after, like, a billion years," she starts, and Momma goes back to folding, popping her gum against her thin yellowed teeth.

On Saturday I head to the park to get out of the house for a while. The kids are always shouting, slapping each other and crying, and then Momma is shouting for them to stop, and then Pete is shouting for everyone to shut up, and I get tired.

Denise is at the park today. An old schoolteacher of mine, she is forty-two and raising her third child. *We missed having a baby around*, is what she told us, but everyone called it a stroke of bad luck.

"Well hello!" she shouts from a bench away. "You're looking just great today. I can tell the baby's healthy, plenty of color in your cheeks." Her kid walks in front of me and stares a while at the lady with the fat stomach. "Benny's getting so talkative. Say hi, Benny!" Benny looks from me to his mom, chewing on his fingers.

"Didn't your Momma used to come here?" Denise asks. "She's got the big curls, right? Lovely dark hair."

"Did she?"

“Don’t you remember playing here?”

I remember the playground, chipped paint and browning grass, but never Mom’s dark curly hair on the sidelines.

“Did you ever talk to her?” I ask.

“Oh, no,” Denise says, “your Momma was never the talkative type.”

I imagine my own baby playing on the monkey bars, chunky arms reaching for the next rung, while I stand on the side watching. Will my kid forget my shadow there like I have forgotten Momma’s?

The park is not so different from home; children yell and they scream and they cry and I rub my hands over my belly. I suddenly feel, sitting on that old faded bench, as though it could be 1987 or 2009 or 2031, and I could be Momma or myself or my daughter and I wouldn’t even know it, wouldn’t even be able to tell the bulging stomachs apart. The familiarity gets me hot and sweaty and short of breath.

Denise sees me rubbing at my stomach and says, “If I can give you one piece of advice: when the time comes, just take the epidural.”

At four in the morning I get up to pee and water falls out of me, all over the carpet. By five the nurse and midwife are here filling the tub, old friends of Momma’s from her nursing days before she started showing up late to work with eyes red and voice wobbly. When Momma called them months ago begging for help with her pregnant daughter, they said they would come only if Momma got clean. And now here we are.

Momma runs laps around the apartment waking everyone up and amassing a collection of items she has decided are necessary: towels, ice, sage and amber. She places them around our centerpiece, the bath, rented on Amazon for the low price of two-hundred and fifty dollars after three months of hiding bills where Pete couldn’t find them. We had to start over once when he shook out an old Phillies cap and one hundred crumpled dollars fell out, and he spent it all on booze. After that we hid them behind the laundry detergent.

The bath was Momma’s idea, of course. *Baby comes slipping out like a fish*, she’d said, *pretty soon everyone will do it this way*.

She’s dragged Lisa and Mickey to the couch where they’ve curled up like cats and gone promptly back to sleep, but Momma doesn’t worry.

“We’ll wake them when the moment comes.”

“But Momma,” I say, “What if it’s traumatizing for them?”

“Even better,” she says.

The girls know all about Momma’s unplanned pregnancy, the big story of how her life was thrown off track. I suppose she can’t miss the opportunity to show it to them in real-life, this spectacle of the sin for which we are all in constant repentance.

Everyone but the sleeping girls helps me into the bath. Even Pete, rings cool against my skin, holds onto my left elbow. He looks stricken. All these women, doing these womanly things, and he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

The bath is similar to the kind of thing people put in their front yards for their kids to play in—blue plastic blown up with a little motor—only it’s smaller, with thicker walls and handles to hang on to. I lower myself into the warm water. Sometimes the nurse empties a bucket and adds a new one, measuring the temperature with two fingers that slosh the water back and forth in three quick swipes.

The labor is slow in progressing. After three hours of what I think is pain, measuring my breathing and sipping the water Momma gives me, I am swept away by tectonic plates of my body and I lose all sense of restraint.

“I want to go to a hospital,” I shout between contractions, “I want the shot. The one in the back.” But it’s like I’ve become a ghost from the neck up, because the women study everything except my face, clucking amongst themselves.

More hours pass and I am forced to trust the midwife. She tells me I am almost there, almost there, and Momma rubs an amber stone while she reads from her spiritual books, and the girls argue over who will cut the cord, and I wish to slip underwater if only to have a second of silence. Pete has returned to watch, timidly, arms crossed over his belly. When the baby finally comes we are all leaning in for a better look, jostling the bath walls. We cannot see her clearly through the splashing water. For a moment she is only dancing shades of beige, features slowly solidifying as she breaks into the air’s dreadful hardness.

A month later I am at the park again. Denise and I have gotten into something of a routine.

“Looking better every day,” she tells me, winking. Denise has asked mercifully little of the delivery.

“How’s Benny?” I say as we watch him chase a boy around a slide.

“Tireless, as usual.”

The other boy knocks his head against a protruding metal foothold. He falls to his knees, face scrunched in surprised pain, mouth open but no sounds coming out. “Oh, goodness,” Denise mutters, as Benny tugs on the kid’s shirt. “Where’s that boy’s mother?”

This must be what people will think of my daughter. *Goodness, where is her mother?*

The boy’s mom jogs over from the other side of the playground. She kneels by her son and Benny takes a few startled steps back at the appearance of an adult. He watches the woman rub her son’s chest and examine his head. Benny sees the fun has ended, and wanders back to Denise.

“Aren’t those your sisters?” Denise asks, nodding to Lisa and Mickey at the swing set behind the playground. They’re swinging higher and higher, looking over the basketball court where men play pick-up and smoke cigarettes.

“And my mother,” I say. Momma is there behind them, a shadow, looking at me with her lips pursed.

“That’s your mother?” Denise says. “My, I didn’t recognize her.”

“No more dark curly hair.” I say, and an uncomfortable silence opens up. Momma’s aged twenty years in ten, and is as skinny as my pre-teen sisters. She waves and calls to the girls, pointing to me.

Momma has been bringing my sisters to the park while I’m there, trying in her way to help, as Momma is always trying to help. She thinks she can trick them into talking to me again. As if, *Oh, look, your sister!* will be enough for them to give me a hug and forget about what I’ve done.

Everyone hates me a little bit, even Pete, who said a new face might just lighten the mood in the house. *I want the mood to already be light, I’d told him, and then shine even brighter for her. Like a supernova. Right, Mickey?* But Mickey had already forgotten her books about stars and ran sobbing to the room we shared.

Only Momma came around. After everyone had stormed off and slammed doors, Momma took her moon pendant off and placed it in my hands, the one engraved *Celeste*. “Now Pete won’t have to build a wall,” she’d said.

I had known, of course, that Pete wouldn’t have to build the wall, and not just because he ‘d never get around to it. It was because of the smiling couple I’d met in month five, their story of an infertile uterus, the papers I’d signed and the deal I’d sealed. And now Celeste would be raised where my problems—which had once been my mother’s—would not trickle through cracks in the generations and onto her shoulders. Where a room had already been

built for her, where she had clothes without holes in the armpits and where her name wasn't Celeste but Claudia.

Denise clears her throat. "Well, I can see the resemblance, now that you've told me."

I look at my weather-worn mother. "Is that a good thing?" I say, and I laugh, and so Denise laughs with me.

"Hey, there's no way around it," she says, "we can't help who our mothers are." And she pats little Benny on his perfectly round head, as perfectly round as a planet in orbit of a star.