

## OUR WAY IN THIS WORLD

Before the robbery, the people in town thought of Celeste as a compliant, modest young woman, if they thought of her at all. They assumed the shock of the bank robbery must have unsettled her and sent her down a new, errant path.

They were wrong.

Celeste had worked as a teller at Heritage Bank & Trust since the summer after she had finished her associate's degree, and over the course of her five years at the bank she had become a favorite among the old ladies who came in to cash their pension and Social Security checks. Celeste wrote their balances for them in large, clear numbers on bank stationery, and she never rushed them as they completed their deposit slips with shaky scrawls. Her manager, Bob the balding, nodded with approval when cardiganed matrons informed him that Celeste was the best teller the bank had ever employed. Celeste wore her relaxed hair in a bob, blouses that revealed no cleavage, and lined skirts that grazed the midpoint of her knee.

When her boyfriend Martin proposed to Celeste before he went to Ohio to attend seminary, she accepted. She was 25 and he was 26, and everyone agreed it was an appropriate time to settle down. Celeste got the feeling that Martin had proposed to her because she was the sort of girl his father thought he should marry, rather than a girl he could not live without. Her mother assured her that true love was not marked by passion and fervor. Her mother and stepfather approved of Martin, with his bland good manners and his call to serve just like his

father, the pastor of the large brick Rivermont A.M.E. Church that Celeste had attended with her mother and stepfather since moving to Lexington.

Celeste had first befriended Martin, who was Pastor Hodges' youngest son, at a church youth event when they were teenagers. He had just ended a tumultuous relationship with a white cheerleader, a relationship both his parents and the cheerleader's parents frowned upon for reasons no one was comfortable articulating. Members of the congregation nodded to each other whenever they saw Celeste and Martin sitting together at church, even though the two did not date in earnest until Martin had graduated from the state university and began working in the business offices of Rivermont.

Naomi, Celeste's closest friend, had been divorced twice by the time she was 28, and she had vowed she would allow no men other than Jake, her toddler son, to infiltrate her heart again. Naomi worked at the hair salon down the street from the bank. When she worked late Celeste would pick Jake up from pre-school and take him to Naomi's duplex for his afternoon snack. Jake ate peanut butter spread on saltines and sipped from an apple juice box while Celeste tidied Naomi's kitchen and asked Jake questions about his day. Jake tried to call her Aunt Cellie, but in his small boy's mouth her name sounded like Aunt Silly. This moniker amused Naomi, Celeste, and Jake so much that even when Jake learned to say her name with clarity, he continued to refer to Celeste as Aunt Silly. No one considered Celeste a silly person. This truth made her relish the boy's name for her even more, although Celeste had never been fond of nicknames.

Neither Celeste's fiancé Martin nor Celeste's mother approved of Naomi. In a rare display of doughtiness, Celeste chose to ignore their comments of, "Now where exactly is Jake's father?" or "You're going to that Naomi woman's house again?"

Naomi was the only one of Celeste's friends whom her mother and Martin referred to as a woman rather than as a girl, and this distinction was not lost on Celeste.

During the first fall that Martin was away at seminary, Celeste began to spend occasional nights at Naomi's place rather than making the long, lonely drive across town to the garage apartment she rented from her mother and stepfather. Some nights Celeste simply fell asleep watching a late movie, other times she planned to stay over so that she could drive Jake to pre-school while Naomi ran errands for the salon before work. The women, their heads wrapped in patterned silk scarves, slept in the same bed companionably, like childhood friends, like cousins.

On occasional Fridays after Naomi had stopped for cocktails with the other hairstylists, she would break her vow to herself and invite a man over. On these nights, Celeste took Jake back to her own apartment. As a cheap indulgence for both of them, Celeste sliced hot dogs into macaroni and cheese made from a box or picked up a sack of Burger King Whopper Juniors. She and Jake ate their makeshift dinners while they watched old episodes of "The Muppet Show." If Jake were still awake when the show ended, they mixed the ingredients for coffee mug brownies to cook in the microwave. Jake liked to stand on a chair to watch the batter puff into a cup of brownie-cake.

Naomi's men never lingered.

Naomi confessed she selected her occasional lovers based on the breadth of their hands and the likelihood that they would leave shortly after having sex with her. After the man of the night left, Celeste dropped Jake off and drove back across town to her own bed, with its clean, pressed sheets and firm, lavender-scented pillows. She called Martin to remind herself that they would soon be married, that they would build a life together with him as pastor and her as his helpmate, that their destinies were entwined and expected and perhaps even preordained.

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Celeste had long been accustomed to doing what others expected of her. She attended with equal care to the expectations of Bob at the bank, her mother, Martin, and, when she was younger, her teachers. At Celeste's middle school back in Memphis, the other kids had called her a goody-goody, a teacher's pet, a snitch. While young Celeste knew in her heart that the first two insults rang true, she chafed at being called a snitch.

Celeste excelled at keeping secrets, even from herself.

Just as she sought approval from the adults in her life, she longed for the same from Evie, a skinny tomboy with a silky afro who presided over the eighth-grade popular girls' table in the cafeteria, and from Evie's on-again-off-again boyfriend Connell, a lupine-faced 14-year-old who, despite his ripped jeans and disorderly folders, managed to make teachers, even the tough ones like Mrs. Hendricks, suppress a smile when he concocted improbable excuses for not completing his homework yet again. Connell's willful, grinning disobedience thrilled Celeste with a delicious shiver that was as seductive as the feeling that washed through her the day Mrs. Hendricks read Celeste's sonnet aloud. Mrs. Hendricks remarked on Celeste's close attention to the rhyme scheme and the syllabic count for each line. When Mrs. Hendricks read Celeste's ending couplet, "And so it goes, the river flows, away, / Away from me, back to the sea, to play," Evie smirked and stage-whispered to Lanie, a freckled ginger girl who agreed with Evie's every utterance, "Looks like Shakespeare ain't dead after all." Several girls in the class giggled. Lanie whispered back, "Bor-ing."

But later, when Celeste went to the girl's locker room to get her gym clothes so that her mother could wash them over the weekend (even though most girls just wore their sweat-stained shorts week after week), and she rounded the corner to find Evie and Lanie kissing each other,

had she snitched? Of course not. She backed away, her Pumas soft against the hard floor. Celeste had almost disappeared around a row of lockers when her sneakers betrayed her with the sharp squeak of rubber against polished concrete. Evie pushed Lanie away. Evie's pupils were liquid with a darkness and warmth that filled Celeste with an unfamiliar sort of longing.

“Look, it's Shakespeare,” Evie said.

“Oh, shit,” Lanie said. She wiped her pale mouth against her sleeve.

“I didn't see anything,” Celeste said. A lie, but all that she could think to say as Evie's eyes faded from their dreamy openness back to their natural state of practiced insouciance. “I swear, I didn't see anything,” she added.

Lanie picked up her backpack, a monogrammed purple monstrosity from Lands' End, and muttered under her breath.

A thought occurred to Celeste. She cocked her head to one side and asked, “Did you and Connell break up?”

Lanie snorted.

Evie said, “Get the fuck out of here, Celeste.”

Celeste ran all the way to chemistry class. She left her gym clothes to grow stale and stiff in her locker. When Mr. Barrett called on Celeste to draw the chemical symbol for sodium chloride, Celeste faced the blank white expanse of the board. She uncapped a green dry erase marker and tried to remember why Mr. Barrett had called her to the front. The teacher shook his head, more in surprise at his most eager pupil's distraction than actual disapproval. He directed his request to another student while Celeste returned to her seat. A salt twinge of guilt at disappointing a teacher wavered in Celeste's throat.

But had she snitched?

No.

And that night, when her dreams were hijacked by images of Evie, her hair grown long and trailing curls across her naked chest, Evie reaching for Celeste in the showers of the girl's locker room, had Celeste told her mother about what she had seen, what she had dreamed?

No.

The following Monday, Mrs. Hendricks wrote *e e cummings* on the board before reading one of the poet's tamer poems to the class. "This is a sharp contrast from what we've been studying," she said. Mrs. Hendricks told the students that they would write a poem in free verse for their homework assignment, which they could begin working on during class. She slid into her big wooden teacher's chair and read from a volume of Cummings' collected works with her chin in her hand and a softness in her expression that never surfaced when the class studied sonnets.

Celeste wrote the assignment in her planner as *free-verse poem, due Wednesday*. She ignored the snickers from Evie and Lanie as Evie pulled up the poet's more explicit poems on the school-issued laptop under the guise of doing homework. At Celeste's elbow, Connell drew pictures of souped-up cars on the cover of a torn blue folder. Celeste opened her own laptop and, cross-referencing poets from her textbook, began to look for examples of free verse. She frowned at the lack of rules, the disdain for consistent rhyme schemes, the words strewn in irregular patterns across the pages and the screen.

"Celeste, psst, Shakespeare," Connell whispered.

He tossed a folded piece of notebook paper onto her desk. Celeste raised her eyebrows. "Who do I pass it too?" she said. In her experience, folded notes were never meant for her, but

rather for girls who made plans with each other for the weekends, who laughed together at lunch, who had sleepovers and pool parties and beach vacations.

“It’s for you,” he said. “From Evie.”

Celeste felt Evie’s stare, heard Lanie’s indiscreet cough. Mrs. Hendricks was still reading, her lips moving over the words while she twirled a section of hair around her forefinger. Celeste unfolded the paper and smoothed it on her desk. In block letters, it read, MEET ME IN THE LOCKER ROOM BEFORE CHEM. The O’s in the words *locker* and *room* were sloppy, full hearts, and a bright pink lipstick mark underscored the message. Heat flamed from Celeste’s heart to her scalp. She fixated on the paper until the embarrassment melted and transformed into a warm glow of acceptance, followed by another feeling—something forbidden, delicious. Celeste dipped her chin toward Evie in acknowledgement. Lanie held a textbook in front of her face, and Connell had resumed drawing cars.

When the bell rang, Celeste positioned her books, pencils, and laptop into their assigned compartments in her backpack. She refolded the lipsticked note and slipped it into her bra the way she had seen her mother do with her cell phone when she was expecting a man to call. Celeste sat at her usual table for lunch, working her way through the turkey sandwich on whole wheat and carrot sticks that she had packed for herself. When her lunch friend Laura asked to borrow her math homework, Celeste handed it over without the stern look she usually adopted when Laura wanted to copy her answers. The folded paper in Celeste’s bra crinkled, and Celeste imagined the lipstick bleeding through the paper and streaking her breast with pink.

Chemistry was the last class of the day, so Celeste had study hall and geometry to trudge through before meeting Evie in the locker room. She tried not to think of what Evie wanted from her even as bits of her dream tickled the edge of her consciousness. Celeste had never kissed

anyone, neither boy nor girl, and she was not sure whom she would prefer to kiss most—Evie or Connell.

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By the time Martin came back to Lexington for Christmas break, Celeste had let Naomi style her hair so that her bangs swooped across her forehead and came to a point on the left side of her face. Her hair in the back was cut short, almost like the big chop some women did before going fully natural. Celeste wore her new hairstyle pulled back on one side with a rose-gold bobby pin. The haircut emphasized Celeste’s cheekbones and pointed chin; she looked almost feline.

Upon seeing her, Martin chuckled. “Was that hairstyle Naomi’s idea?”

Celeste nodded as she removed the bobby pin. She combed her hair forward with her fingers until it obscured her field of vision.

“It looks a little butch. You’ll probably want to grow it out so you can fix it like usual for the wedding pictures.” They had not discussed a date for the wedding other than agreeing it would be next summer, after Martin finished seminary.

Celeste twisted her engagement ring around and around on her finger while Martin flipped through channels on her tiny TV. He settled on a show where young vocalists endured critiques from a panel of washed-up performers. Celeste hated the forced *schadenfreude* of reality shows, but she said nothing.

#

The more Celeste tried to do what people expected from her, the more paralyzed she became. Young Celeste could not figure out how to begin a poem with no defined rules, without the parameters of meter and rhyme. Study hall stretched on while Celeste read poems that made

her neck burn with their suggested meanings. Math class slipped away in geometric theorems. When the bell rang, Celeste stuffed her book and papers into her backpack any which way in her rush to get out of the classroom and to the locker room before the break ended. At the door to the locker room, she paused, her hand trembling on the big metal bar. The thought of pressing her mouth to Evie's produced a churning, murky feeling in Celeste's midsection. She blinked, took a deep breath, and walked in, proud of herself for doing what she wanted to do rather than what her mother or her teachers expected her to do.

The girls from the popular girls' table stared back at her, their hands clapped over their pretty pink mouths, their eyes sparkling with restrained laughter.

"See, I told you she was a lezzie!" Evie's voice rang out.

Lanie said, "Jesus, what a dyke. You were right, Evie."

The door clanged shut. All those pretty girls laughed and laughed while Celeste stood apart, her stomach swallowing her dropped heart. Evie was sarcastic with other kids, flippant to teachers, lazy at schoolwork. Celeste had never witnessed her in an act of cruelty.

"I'm not, I just thought," Celeste's voice cracked. Her eyes pleaded with Evie as panic rose in her belly. What would everyone say? Was she a lezzie for coming to the locker room with hope in her heart and the lipsticked note pressed against her breast?

Evie glared back, her eyes big and dark, her jaw set in a sad, hard line.

"Evie, I'm not, I mean I just thought," Celeste tried again.

One of the girls from the basketball team said, "Celeste, the Ce-lezzie." One by one each of the girls except Evie began to chant, "Ce-lezzie, Ce-lezzie."

Evie's voice cut through the chanting. "Get the fuck out of here, Celeste," she said. Evie sounded almost gentle, her eyes wide with, what? Fear? Affection? Celeste thought of a line from one of the poems she had read in study hall, *eyes big love-crumbs*.

Once again, Celeste turned and ran, past chem lab and Mr. Barrett's startled face, out into the parking lot where the cold November air took her breath and released her brimming tears.

For a long, long while, that was the last time Celeste could remember doing what she wanted to do rather than what other people told her she was supposed to do.

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One night after a glass of sweet red wine, Celeste told Naomi about Evie and the other middle school girls, of the terrible months where girls whispered "Ce-lezzie" whenever she answered a question in class or walked into the locker room. Celeste and Naomi had been chatting and sharing an afghan on Naomi's sofa while Jake whirred Hot Wheels across a weathered coffee table. Celeste, cheeks aflame, recounted the whole experience. Naomi listened, her hands cupping a mug as if it held tea rather than wine. Celeste left nothing out, including the occasional dreams she still had of a naked Evie, her eyes like big love-crumbs, and her simultaneous crush on both Evie and Connell. At the conclusion of Celeste's tale, Naomi took their cups to the kitchen so that Jake would not knock them over with his Hot Wheels. She returned to the sofa, took Celeste's face in her hands, and kissed her. Celeste tried not to wonder if she had exposed her deepest secret, that long-buried story, to win the feeling of Naomi's mouth on hers.

It was not long before Naomi's nights with men went from occasional to almost nonexistent, and Celeste began to spend more time in Naomi's bed than her own. The night they moved beyond cuddling and kissing, the night they wriggled out of the baggy T-shirts that served

as pajamas while Jake dreamed his little boy dreams in the next room, Celeste thought her beating heart would tear through her skin. Afterwards, Celeste apologized for the wetness she had left on Naomi's bed.

“That's never happened before. I mean Martin and I have done it, but I've never, you know, not like that,” she said.

Naomi laughed and spread a thick blanket over the damp spot on the sheet before crawling back into bed and cupping Celeste's body with her own.

The next day, a denim-clad boy delivered a big bouquet of blue and pink-tipped hydrangeas to Celeste at the bank. She let the other tellers assume they were from Martin, although she knew even before she opened the card that he would never send a bouquet so impractical and full and beautiful. Celeste's stomach fluttered when she read the card, “For Celeste, my Silly Ce-lezzie, XOXO.” In her lover's mouth, the middle school nickname had lost the power to wound. She did not want to leave the card for anyone else to read, so she tucked it into her bra, next to her heart.

That night, when she undressed in Naomi's bedroom, the skin-warmed note fluttered to the floor. Naomi picked it up and held it to her face, her eyes warm and liquid.

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After the Ce-lezzie incident had become known all over school, after even Laura had declined to sit with Celeste at lunch, Connell called out to Celeste in the hallway.

“I didn't know Evie could be such a bitch,” Connell said. Before she could respond, Connell hugged her. He smelled like soap and cigarettes, a combination Celeste associated with her own father before he had moved away. “You know Evie's really the one who, well, I think she and Lanie...”

Celeste nodded, the only acknowledgement she had given that she had seen Evie and Lanie together in that way.

“You should tell the principal what they did to you, or maybe Mrs. Hendricks. She really likes you,” Connell said.

“I’m no snitch.”

Connell tipped his chin up and pulled his shoulders back, a gesture Celeste recognized from the times he failed to amuse a teacher with his excuses and was preparing to be given detention or sent to the principal’s office. “You’re better than they are,” he said.

Celeste remembered Evie’s eyes, big love-crumbs, and her sad, hard jawline. She shrugged. She repeated a phrase she had heard her mother use on the phone with her best friend, a divorced woman who was sleeping with a man who swore he was leaving his wife, “We’re all just trying to find our way in this world.”

Celeste wanted Connell to kiss her, wanted to prove to him that she did, in fact, like boys, him in particular. He grinned, his pointed incisors gleaming, and chucked her on the shoulder. “Hah, you should be a poet. Or a, what are they called? A philosopher.” Connell’s eyes, green and sharp and laughing, radiated a kind of broken quality, a persistent sadness that buoyed the veneer of jokes and defiance.

“Well, I’m no snitch, no matter what.”

Celeste moved to the Kenwick neighborhood outside Lexington with her mother and her new stepfather the following summer. She left the locker room nickname behind in east Memphis as she vowed to do the right things, to be the girl she imagined she should be.

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After a few days in the corner of Celeste's workstation, the hydrangea bouquet grew limp and faded. Celeste was contemplating hanging the stems upside down to dry when the men came into the bank, their faces smushed flat by pantyhose, their gloved hands carrying green canvas bags. One man carried an AR-15, a rifle Celeste recognized from video footage of school shootings. Bob the bank manager sunk to the ground behind the teller wall. Celeste felt him curl next her calves. She longed to sink there next to him, to hide beneath the ledge. Instead, she straightened her shoulders and stepped forward. One of her favorite old ladies, a shrunken widow the tellers called Miss Martha, held a pen stamped with the bank's logo as she signed the back of a check at Celeste's window.

The man with the rifle stood in the center of the lobby and shouted, "Nobody move!"

Miss Martha wrote her new balance in her checkbook, unaware of the scene taking place behind her since she had once again left her hearing aide at home.

Celeste reached for Miss Martha's hand through the gap in the glass partition. She lifted her chin toward the man with the gun as she squeezed the old woman's hand.

"It's going to be okay, Miss Martha," she said.

Bob shuddered in the floor next to Celeste's legs and she thought of little Jake, scared from a dream, crawling into bed between her and Naomi, wrapping his chubby toddler arms around whichever woman was closest to him.

One of the men stared at her, his face long and distorted under the pantyhose, his eyes sharp and green, his flattened features wolf-like and menacing. A slow buzzing filled Celeste's head, and her joints and bowels loosened. She felt Bob inch closer to the wall under the counter, and out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the other tellers push the emergency button.

Connell's features had grown harder, but time and the crude pantyhose mask had emphasized rather than obscured their lupine quality. The sadness she had glimpsed in his eyes in that middle school hallway had been replaced by a fierce coarseness. She blinked in acknowledgement, confident of their mutual recognition. She wanted to call out to him. Celeste tilted her head to one side and mouthed, "I'm no snitch." She hoped he understood, that whatever led him here, to her bank and her little old ladies, that the tumble of years between then and now, that his very identity, were safe with her.

Miss Martha stood to one side, the bank pen still clutched in her hand. Celeste stacked what cash she had in her drawer in neat rows on the counter, ignoring her stuttering heart and the whimpers of Bob the balding at her feet.

Connell rapped on the glass partition. "Push the money out through the hole."

She recognized his voice, roughed by cigarettes and bravado. Celeste slid the money through the scooped-out space below the partition. When Connell raked the bills into a bag, his gloved hand grazed Celeste's trembling one. He zipped the bag and winked at her.

"A philosopher, for sure," he said.

After the men left, their bags bulging with hauls from the cash drawers, and the first police sirens began to wail in the distance, Bob stood, his shirt stained with perspiration that arced in big circles beneath his armpits. He said, "Everything's okay now, folks. Just stay calm. The police will be here any minute now."

Miss Martha frowned at Bob and turned to Celeste. "You're a brave woman, a good person," Miss Martha said.

That night, curled next to Naomi on her old sofa while Jake assembled Lego towers and watched *My Pretty Pony* cartoons, Celeste talked about Connell, his sadness and kindness, his

laconic good humor, and together she and Naomi speculated about what led men and women to be who they were. In a different life, would Connell have gone to seminary like Martin? Or taken a job in Alaska just to get away from responsibilities like little Jake's father? Naomi did not suggest Celeste go to the police with her knowledge of the identity of one of the armed men.

Like Connell all those years ago, perhaps Naomi admired Celeste's subdued yet resilient flintiness, and like young Connell, perhaps part of that admiration was seeded in doubt that she herself would have behaved with the same consistency of character.

When Martin learned of the robbery, from the news and from Celeste's mother rather than from Celeste herself, he called. Celeste murmured reassurances that she was fine, that the men had not harmed her or anyone else. She told him about Bob's cowering and the fear for herself and Miss Martha that had clutched at her heart.

"Why didn't you call?" he said. "A girl should call her fiancé when something like this happens." He sounded more annoyed than concerned.

"I guess I'm in shock," Celeste said. Naomi grinned, filled the electric kettle to brew water for tea. "Maybe you should pray for me," she added. Martin assured her that he would pray for her, that he could come down for the weekend to be there for her.

"I'm okay, really. I'll see you at Easter," Celeste said.

After Celeste ended her call, Naomi handed her a mug of mint tea. Without her salon make-up and with her hair pulled away from her face by a terrycloth headband, Naomi looked like the younger of the two.

"I want to stay here, with you and Jake," Celeste said.

Naomi smiled, sipped her tea. "For more than the night?"

Celeste slipped Martin's ring onto Naomi's manicured finger. It caught the light from the lamp and refracted little prisms across the coffee table. Naomi rested her newly bejeweled hand on Celeste's thigh.

"I'll have to give that ring back to Martin," Celeste said.

"I may still want to be with a man, sometimes," Naomi whispered.

Celeste shrugged. "We're all just trying to find our way in this world."

Jake looked up from his cartoons and Lego towers. "Amen," he said.

The women laughed, and, at least for that night, they were happy enough to pretend they were the only people in the world.

THE END