

A GIRDLE OF MOTHERS

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I am girdled by mothers. Red-lipsticked and Chantilly-scented, they use their tractor beam of guilt to drag me into the kitchen and absorb me into their alien world.

Mrs. Donato sips Canadian Club as she arranges the *antipasto* tray. Mrs. Kendal chops vegetables. My mother and sister set out platters of food dropped off by neighbours: beef casseroles, cannelloni, cabbage rolls. Someone even brought a bucket of fried chicken; Mrs. Donato picks out greasy breasts and legs with her long, orange fingernails and arranges them on a china platter.

With so many bodies pressed into our tiny kitchen, the mothers' washed-to-death summer dresses brush me every time they move; I try not to look at their flesh bulging out of too-tight bodices and armholes. They shout the same questions to one another, over and over, in an endless loop: "Do we need more coffee? Did someone ask Father whether he wanted his cocktail freshened? Are we out of cold cuts?"

When the question they really want to ask is: *When are you going to have a good, long cry, Debbie?*

The mothers are worried because I haven't mourned for my grandfather, Joe Tataglia, who has been dead for three days. What they don't understand is that in the World of Tomorrow, women don't weep and wail, or go nuts over the beautiful potato salad, or wipe their armpits with tea towels when they think nobody's looking: they are clean, lean Barbie dolls in tunics and go-go boots, tending their hydroponic gardens against a star-spangled lunar sky. The last thing they would do is cry over a normal biological process like death.

I want to be free of all these sweaty mourners crowding our house, and be in my room reading a back issue of *Amazing Space Inventions!* But the mothers keep me kitchened on Old Earth.

It would be a different story if I had been born a boy—a *Donald* instead of a *Debbie*. No one would expect me to cry. I'd be sent outside to blow off steam, get some fresh air and toss the old pigskin around. Maybe scan the sky for satellites. My grandfather told me you can see them in daylight, if you look hard enough.

Instead, I'm sent to tidy up the living room, where men in shirt-

sleeves suck on beers, while the parish priest, back in his regular clothes after the funeral mass, sips a rye-and-ginger.

"This Trudeau chap was educated by the Jesuits, you know," I hear the priest say.

Just then, Mrs. Donato—*Claudia*—comes into the living room with the bottle of Canadian Club. She giggles, "All the Frenchies are good Catholics even when they're playboys, aren't they? Can I freshen your drink, Father?"

Everyone laughs, including the priest, because Claudia Donato is the youngest, most glamorous mother, with backcombed black hair and false eyelashes. As I head back to the kitchen, she lassoes me with a frilly cocktail apron, knotting it so tightly around my waist that I can barely breathe.

"Don't spill anything on your skirt, sweetie," Mrs. Donato advises me. "There are boys here!"

Back in the kitchen, I unload my tray into the sink where Mrs. Kendal is up to her elbows in Lux. Even though the mothers use each other's first names—Claudia, Nadja, Maddy—they call Mrs. Kendal, 'Mrs. Kendal', instead of by her given name, Bea. Unlike everyone else, she speaks only one language, English. And unlike the other mothers, she's black. Her family has been here the longest, going back to the Underground Railroad. Although she lives in the neighbourhood, she only ever comes to our house to sell brushes and cleansers to my mother.

"You remember Debbie, Mrs. Kendal?" my mother says. "She's the same age as your son, I think."

"I guess they'll be in high school together this fall," says Mrs. Kendal, smiling at me. "My John's a bit of a bookworm, I'm afraid. Do you like school, dear?"

"I won first place in the Middle School Science Fair the past two years in a row," I state.

"My Pop encouraged Debbie's interest in science and outer space and all that," sighs my mother, as if apologizing for my I.Q. "She takes it all a bit too seriously."

Mrs. Kendal nods sympathetically, one long-suffering mother to another. "My son likes those things, too. Astronauts, time travel. I don't know what all. Don't worry, Mrs. Baci, they'll grow out of it. It's just a phase."

Just a phase.

Nonno Joe sure didn't think so. He was a master electrician from

the days when a light bulb was as big a deal as the Mercury V2 rocket is today—that's what he always said, anyway: "Me and electricity, we grow up together. It has no secrets from me!"

He'd been shocked so many times in his life from accidentally touching live wires that he believed he was immune from electrocution and lightning strikes. He'd even stand outside in thunderstorms, admiring the display of lights, while Nonna Mariangela and my mother shouted at him to *get back indoors!*

Another thing about Nonno Joe: he was brilliantly clever. Not just because he could rewire an entire bungalow in one day flat with two fifteen-minute breaks for smokes and coffee but because he kept learning new things. He made sure I did, too.

He gave me books about great Italian scientists and inventors. Da Vinci. Marconi. Galileo. And the greatest of them all, Enrico Fermi, who helped develop what my grandfather considered the Italian achievement of the century, the atomic bomb.

"Don't talk to me about Roberto Oppenheimer," he'd say. "Without Fermi, no chain reaction. Without chain reaction, no bomb. And with no bomb, where would we be? Overrun by *fascisti*, that's where! *Capisci*, Debbie?"

"*Capisco*, Nonno," I would always say, and give him a salute.

When I was seven, Nonno Joe taught me chess. For my eighth birthday—his eighty-fifth—he bought me my first chemistry set. When I turned ten—and he, eighty-seven—he set up a telescope for looking at constellations. One night, we found the American satellite, Telstar.

We sat side by side in front of the TV for every Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space launch. "*Guarda*, Debbie, they name their damn rockets after Roman gods, but are there any Italian astronauts?" he'd say, waving his cigar; then he'd pat my knee and say: "You'll be the first."

My parents didn't mind, at first: *Debbie's the grandson Pop never had*, my mother liked to joke.

But eventually, she started worrying that all this science stuff was repressing my 'natural mothering instinct': I actually heard her say that to my sister Linda. That's when she started pushing dolls on me: not Malibu Barbie or Beach Party Skipper, but chubby, foreign-looking babies in lacy caps and fussy dresses. They came from a store run by a fat Yugoslavian woman downtown who imported all her toys from Europe. None of the dolls spoke, walked or pooped their diapers after being spoon-fed a blue chemical paste, which would at least have been mildly scientific. All they could do was lift their dimpled arms as if to

say, *I'm here until you have a real baby to love! Please be my Mommy!*

I kept the fat, foreign babies stuffed in my closet.

There was only one good thing about them: the off-gassing of polymers from their plastic skins. Every time I opened the closet door and smelled that synthetic smell, it reminded me that I would never be a mother or wife, but an astronaut. Whenever I told my older sister this, she snorted, "Yeah right, Sleeping Beauty. See what happens to science when some handsome prince wakes you with a kiss."

Three days ago, on my thirteenth birthday, Nonno Joe died of a stroke. My father found him on the living room floor of his house, holding the phone; he must have collapsed trying to dial our number to wish me a happy birthday. My grandmother, Nonna Mariangela, was sitting in her wheelchair watching *Truth or Consequences*, her back to my grandfather's prone body. Even though Nonno Joe died six feet away from her, she didn't know she was a widow until my mother told her. Maybe not even then.

That's what happens if you live too long on the Planet of the Mothers. You start losing your mind.

My mother insisted that Nonna Mariangela go to the funeral, even though she hadn't left her house in over a year; she had become soft and large, and forgotten how to speak English. My father pushed her wheelchair down the street to the church for the funeral mass, but he pointed out that lifting her in and out of the undertaker's limo to go to the cemetery would likely give him a heart attack.

It didn't: one of the undertakers scanned the crowd in the church and came back with Marcello Junior, the seventeen-year-old son of the man who runs the candy store. Marcello hoisted Nonna out of her wheelchair and into the back seat of the limo, no problem at all. My father stood watching, his hands making little circles in the air. I could tell he wanted to get in there and help, but Marcello Junior had things under control.

After I've hauled my third tray of dirty cups and highball glasses into the kitchen, my mother pulls me aside and says, "Debbie, take a plate of food out to Marcello Junior. I want to specially thank him for his help with Nonna Mariangela."

I carefully make up a plate from the buffet table and bring it to the front porch. Marcello Junior is sitting next to an old lady with a face like an axe and six black-haired teenage boys, all drinking beer. When I appear, the boys' eyes catch on my body like dark little fish hooks.

These are exactly the kind of boys to stay away from, if you don't

want to find yourself trapped on the Planet of the Mothers. No one has told me this: I just *know*.

Of all the boys, Marcello makes me especially uncomfortable. I'm not sure why.

Maybe it's because he looks like a painting of one of the young saints you see in Church, the one the Romans shot to death with arrows. All Linda's friends have crushes on him, and Linda probably would, too, but she says she could never date a boy who works in a candy store, no matter how good-looking he is.

When I hand Marcello the plate and say, "My mother says thanks for all the help," he looks surprised, as if lifting people's grandmothers in and out of limousines is something he does all the time, just for fun.

"Tell your mom it was the least I could do for your *nonno*," he answers.

"Thank you," I say, adding, "It was his time."

People have been telling me that all day: *Joe was ninety, it was his time!* This does not go over well with the old lady with a face like an axe.

"What do you know about 'his time'? This is for God to say, not little girls," she tells me fiercely.

Marcello turns to the old lady and says something in an Italian that I can't understand, probably a dialect. He pats the old lady's hand and she gives a grunt.

"*Mi dispiace, Signora*," I mumble to the old lady. Flushed with embarrassment, I feel a sudden lump in my throat that warns me I'm about to cry. I run down the porch steps, through the driveway, to the back yard. Dropping into a lawn chair under the laundry line, I try to catch my breath. I can't swallow because of the lump growing in my throat, a bubble of shame and sadness, waiting to explode. Off in the distance, I can see the carefree neighbourhood boys, still in their church suits, chasing a football through my mother's tomato plants.

That's when I realize I'm not alone. I look up and standing over me is Marcello. The sun is behind him; all I can see is the outline of his curly head.

"Did Prima scare you?"

"A little," I admit.

He squats down in front of me, the way you do when you're talking to a little kid. To my surprise, he takes my hand.

"She didn't mean it how it sounded. She just has a... strong way of putting things, sometimes."

"That's okay," I say. I sense that there's something else he wants to

say; he's struggling to get it out.

"I miss your *nonno* a lot," he says. "After I dropped out of school, he started coming by to play chess with me, when the store was quiet. He taught me some algebra, too."

Marcello's voice is shaking. That's when it dawns on me that he's grieving too, and the bubble in my throat finally bursts.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I sob, my face in my hands.

I'm making these awful sounds, wailing and gagging; now that I've started, I can't stop. I'm turning myself inside-out with grief, my face covered in sweat and snot and tears.

"It's okay, Debbie, it's okay," he says, as tenderly as a mother. He pulls out a handkerchief and dabs my face. I press my face to his shoulder; my tears soak into the rough, camphor-smelling wool of his too-small jacket. And we just stay like that for a while, comforting one another, me huddled messily in the lawn chair, him crouched before me.

When I've cried myself out, he nudges my head up from his shoulder. His skin smells like lemon soap and shaving cream. I'm suddenly filled with a sense of having eaten too much of something sweet, like gelato covered with maple syrup.

He closes his eyes and kisses me, pushing open my lips with the tip of his tongue. I'm so surprised that I open my mouth, too. He tastes of tobacco and beer. He's the best thing I've ever tasted in my life.

Until he moves away from me, with a yell, falling backwards onto the lawn. I see a tiny glittering thread in the air, glowing red like the end of a wire.

Marcello takes a deep, shaky breath, then says: "All right! I got carried away! I'm sorry!"

I get the feeling he's not apologizing to me.

He gets back on his feet and walks up the driveway, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

I pick up Marcello's handkerchief and rub it on my face. I can still smell him on it. Lemon, tobacco, and the unmistakable scorched smell of a popped light bulb.

The mothers were right. I feel better now, empty and light and pure. I stuff the handkerchief in my apron pocket and head toward the dreamy heat of the kitchen.