

The Naming of Girls

by Tawnysha Greene

One morning after church, we go with Daddy's sister to the hardware store, buy wood, nails, and wire. She carries a drawing with her of a tall room, levels marked off in inches, blurred after being erased, redrawn many times, and shows it to the people who work at the store. They point her to the wood cutting station at the end of the aisle. She wants to build a chicken coop.

They've had chickens before, my cousin tells me as we watch a man measure, saw the wood down to small beams. She tells me about the mornings they harvested the eggs, reaching in the coop when it was still dark, taking eggs still warm from their nests. She gave the birds names, spoke to them as they woke, and I watch her hands as she describes how she used to lift them, move them to the side.

"The birds are coming next week," she says, and she looks to my sister who watches us talk, watches my cousin's hands, too. "You can help me name them."

We bring the wood, wire from the car to the backyard and while Momma and Daddy's sister hammer it together, talk in between strokes, we all think of names for the birds. My cousin writes them all on a sheet of paper and when Daddy's sister tells us we are in the way, we go to our cousin's room, think of more names while the hammering goes on outside.

My sister and I take turns with the sheet, narrow down the names we like, and my cousin opens her top drawer, gets out a candy cigarette, holds it between her fingers like I had seen Daddy's momma do, and my sister gasps, asks if it's real.

She smiles, shakes her head. "It's candy," she says.

I had seen my cousin suck on them before, blow once through them first, watch as sugar smoke billowed out the other side, as she smiles, offers one to me. I remember the cigar Daddy smoked in the restaurant, the way his large fingers fumbled with it, how it had gone out, different than the way my cousin holds it now, delicate in

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her fingers, lithe and beautiful. It smells sweet, like gum, as she sucks on it, watches us put the names of the birds away.

"You want to see something?" she asks, and we get on her bed, watch her open her closet, get something from inside.

She digs past her dance dresses, the blue sparkly one that I love to touch when she lets me go through her clothes, and I watch as she picks up a shopping bag, puts whatever is inside behind her back, faces us.

"Can you guess what it is?"

My sister guesses, words that get louder and louder, but each time, my cousin shakes her head. My cousin looks to me. "Do you know?"

I don't, and she pauses, then draws it out in a single motion, and we both gasp.

A bra.

But unlike the ones we've seen in the laundry, ones that Momma wears. It's a colored bra, a blue one with white lace along the top edges of the cups, the sides of the straps.

We reach out to touch it, mouths open in awe, and my cousin lets us crowd in to see.

Our voices get low as we ask her where she got it, when, and how it felt, and she answers back. Kmart, yesterday, amazing.

We both ask then. "Can we see it on?"

She smiles, looks to the bra in her hands. "Sure."

Closing the door, she steps to the other side of the room, turns around, takes off her shirt. She wears a white bra now, and while my sister and I stare at the floor, I sneak glances of her unhooking the clasp, taking it off, so that her back is bare, and I can see the muscles, the bones underneath move as she puts the new one on.

She turns around, hands on her hips, and we look, but stay where we are, hands clasped in front of us, afraid to touch.

"It's beautiful," I say.

My sister nods next to me, shy now that my cousin has her shirt off and when Momma calls to us from downstairs, we all scramble around the room, my cousin jerking her shirt over her head, us

getting out the bird names again, sitting on the floor, pretending we never saw anything.

My cousin opens her door and we all go down the stairs and for the rest of the day, my sister and I glance at each other, smile, then look away, try not to stare at my cousin's shirt, the hints of blue underneath, the folds of lace against the fabric when she moved, try not to think of what was beneath our own shirts, the bare skin of girls.

