



Black Cat (Gemini)

By V.C. Andrews

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She hid her true self. Now the truth will be revealed. Living a life of lies under the thumb of her widowed, spiritually obsessed mother, Celeste has been forced to take on the identity of her dead twin brother, Noble. She's almost forgotten what it's like to be Celeste - except for the one thing that keeps her sane: caring for her darling daughter, Baby Celeste. But when Celeste's mother marries a kindly neighbour, a new breed of poisonous secrets and vicious enemies will force Celeste to do what she must - to survive the darkness ...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

With the publication of her first novel, FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC, Virginia Andrews became a bestselling phenomenon. Since then, readers have been captivated by more than forty novels in the Virginia Andrews' series. Her novels have sold over 100 million copies worldwide and been translated into 22 languages.

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Chapter 1:Noble's Pleas

"Noble," Mama called with urgency resonating in her voice.

I turned to see her waving at me from the front steps of the porch. Her hazel brown, shoulder-length hair fell straight alongside her cheeks. She had a radish-red bandanna tied across her forehead, which she said would ward off recent curses whenever they were thrown in her direction, so I knew something had spooked her today.

She was standing there with Baby Celeste beside her, which was quite unusual. Mama never brought her out during the daytime for fear someone, even from the distance in a passing car, might see her and learn that she existed. This secrecy had existed from the moment Baby Celeste had been born, a little more than two and a half years ago.

Today was one of those summer days in July when clouds seemed hinged to the horizon, not a single sliver of one interfering with the orange disk of sun sliding gracefully over the icy blue toward the mountains in the west. I was on my hands and knees pruning weeds in the herb garden. The redolent aroma of rich, wet soil filled my nostrils. Worms, lubricated and shiny from the night's rain, slipped through my muddied fingers. A wisp of a breeze teased me with a promise of some relief that had yet to be fulfilled. I was already quite tan, the farmer's tan, Daddy used to call it, because my arms were dark up to the edges of my sleeves and my neck down to my collar. It was evident only when I was naked.

Mama took another step toward me and away from the house to call again. Through the hot, undulating air that lay between us, the house seemed to shimmer and swell up around her and Baby Celeste as if it were determined to block them from the view passengers in cars along the highway would have. The house would always protect them, protect us. Mama believed that. She believed it was as sacred as a church.

Anyone looking at the house might readily accept that it held some special powers. It was large and unique in this area of upstate New York, an eclectic Queen Anne with a steeply hipped roof, two lower cross gables, and a turret at the west corner of the front facade. The turret room was a fairly good size round room with two windows that faced the front. Mama told me that her grandfather had often used the room as a personal retreat. He would spend hours and hours alone in it, reading or simply smoking his pipe and staring out at the mountains. Perhaps because of that story or simply because the room was so private and hidden at the top of the small stairway that led up to it, I used it as a retreat, a secret place, as well.

Sometimes at night after Baby Celeste was asleep and Mama was distracted, I was able to sneak up to the turret room, where Mama had put all our mirrors except the ones on the bathroom walls above the sinks. There were many antiques and boxes of very old things stored there. She put the mirrors there because she said our good family spirits avoided them, especially full-length mirrors like the gilded-framed oval one with

a rose carved at the top.

"Despite the eternal joy they share in the other world, they do not like to be reminded that they are out of their bodies, that their bodies are long decayed into dust. What they see of themselves is more like an image captured in a wisp of twirling smoke," she explained.

I thought that made good sense. While we were in this world, nothing held our attention or was as important as our bodies. Who didn't look at his or her body often during the day, whether it be in a storefront window, a mirror, pictures, or even in the eyes of someone else? What was more intriguing than yourself?

Denied the common opportunities to do so, I would stand before the oval mirror in the turret room, undress, and gaze at my uncovered and now undisguised female body, turning to look at myself from every angle like someone who was trying on a new dress. Often, I would feel as if I were looking through a window at someone else and not in a mirror at myself. That made the mirror seem magical to me, and that in itself turned the turret room into a special place. It not only held secrets of our past in old dresser drawers and cartons, it provided a pathway of escape, a place where dreams were unrestricted, and after all, it was in dreams only that I could be who I was.

For nearly ten years now, I had had to deny the existence of whom and what I saw standing before me. There was no doubt in my mind that no night in my life would ever be as traumatic as the night Mama took me out to the small, old family graveyard to say good-bye to myself in a funeral so private even the stars were kept hidden behind clouds.

Lying there in the open, freshly dug grave with his hands crossed over his chest was my twin brother, Noble, wearing my dress and even my amulet, the Mystic Star with its seven points. I hadn't even realized she had taken it off me during the night. Noble's eyes were so tightly closed they looked stitched shut. I had let Mama down, disappointed her so deeply, I made her very soul cringe. I hadn't protected my twin brother and therefore I had to be the one buried and gone. She transformed me into Noble like some wizard waving a wand, and then she told the world I had been kidnapped. The community pitied her, pitied us when search parties found one of my shoes in the forest and concluded she was right: someone had taken me.

Dozens of people traipsed through the property and crossed over to our nearest neighbor, an elderly man named Gerson Baer, who lived alone. He had nothing to offer, but because he was a loner and a neighbor, he fell under some suspicion for a while. He was wise enough to permit a full search of his house and property, and eventually the police left him alone, but Mommy predicted nasty, stupid people would always suspect him. She sounded as if she really did feel sorry for him, but she also mentioned that it helped us.

A week went by and the story stopped being published in the paper. Occasionally, one of the sheriff's patrolmen appeared. The detective returned and went back over the story. Mommy looked terrible. She didn't eat. She didn't do anything to make herself attractive. Some people, old friends of Daddy's, and his former partner, Mr. Calhoun, sent over flowers and candy with good wishes. The detective offered to contact any family to assist us, but Mommy thanked him and told him we would be all right. He promised to keep us up-to-date on any new developments.

In the beginning, whenever I heard people talk sadly about me, it was truly as if I were invisible, a ghost listening to people talk about her and what she was like when she was alive. Mama said nice things about me, things that made me ache to return and again be that responsible, bright, and intelligent girl. Visitors who had come to sympathize would shake their heads and look at me sadly.

"I bet you miss your sister very much," they would say. Or they would say, "How lonely you must be, all by yourself now."

Mama would agree we had been inseparable, truly twins who could think each other's thoughts. Her eyes would gloss over and she would look as if she couldn't take another breath. The visitors would blanket her in sympathy.

I had to nod or wipe a drummed-up tear from my cheek because Noble, being a boy, wouldn't show his sadness so readily. He would be tougher. Slowly, in small ways at first, Mama had me imitate Noble, even take on his bad habits. Nothing angered her as much as my resisting or failing to succeed at such forgery. I wanted so to please her, but for me, every little action, characteristic, habit, I successfully simulated was like another shovelful of dirt I cast on my own grave. Sometimes, at night, I would wake up feeling as if I were suffocating. I would be all in a sweat, the redolent aroma of cool, dark earth about me. I thought I even felt it on my face and brushed my cheeks frantically before settling down and trying again to sleep.

Every night I fell asleep thinking I might never wake up or I would wake up in a grave. There was only one way to stay above it, to keep out of it, to remain alive.

Mama had always loved Noble more than she loved me, and now as Noble I could have all that love for myself, so I worked hard at becoming my brother. I took on chores girls my age would never assume like chopping and splitting firewood, changing tires, and greasing lawn mowers and other engines. I repaired a shed roof, hammered and sawed, painted and varnished. My hands developed calluses. My thicker forearms looked more like a boy's than a girl's, and when I walked, I strutted with a masculine gait that even took me by surprise when I became aware of it. It was Mama's smiles of satisfaction that made me aware. Her smile of approval countered and overcame any hesitation, any self-consciousness I might have.

Growing hard and lean, remaining in home school and rarely confronting girls my age, I succeeded to the point where I even dreamed Noble's dreams, saw the spirits I imagined he would see, such as cousins his age who had had similar tragic deaths, impish, naughty little boys who teased their sisters and like him went running and shouting through make-believe battlefields and jungles, or I would see strong uncles with muscles built out of hard farm work or carpentry. Our dainty, female family spirits seemed to avoid me the way they would avoid Noble. It was as if they were really and truly a part of Mama's plan or at least afraid of contradicting it.

For as long as I could remember, Mama had communicated with her family spirits. She had promised both Noble and me that we would be able to do the same, and although our daddy shook his head and didn't believe in any of it, he didn't really try too hard to force her to stop believing. There was no doubt in my mind that she wouldn't have under any circumstances anyway. It was a major part of whom and what she was. She would tell Daddy he couldn't love her without loving that. Even as a little girl, I could see he knew that and he accepted. How great was his love, I thought, and like every little girl, I dreamed I would find someone as wonderful as my daddy to love me. However, I was terrified I wasn't as good and as beautiful as Mommy and would never find anyone like Daddy.

Mama always thought Noble would cross over, as she called it, before I did, but Noble never had as passionate an interest in our family spirits and the world beyond as I had. It frustrated Mama. She tried everything, including teaching him how to meditate, but nothing worked, so she concluded that something evil was standing in Noble's way. That was why she made me truly my brother's keeper and why she was so upset when he died in the accident in the creek. He fell off the big rock from which he was fishing. I wanted him to come home, but he wouldn't, so we had a tug-of-war with his pole. Was Mama right? Was it really

my fault?

He couldn't die; he wouldn't die. His spirit would enter me, and that was how it would be forever and ever. But neither Mama nor I understood how powerful the woman in me would become. Years later in my solitude I couldn't hold her back. I couldn't prevent her from reemerging. At my private, secret place in the forest, I uncovered myself and let myself breathe as Celeste, and it was during one of those episodes that our new neighbor's son, Elliot Fletcher, discovered the truth and blackmailed me into having sex with him.

Now, when I think of that, when I permit myself to remember those secret rendezvous, I hear a voice inside me that tells me I wasn't blackmailed as much as I would like to believe. I wanted what had happened to me to happen. It was a way of denying what I had become and returning to whom and what I was.

Baby Celeste was born as a result of all that, but I had to keep my pregnancy secret as long as I could, knowing how Mama would be devastated. I couldn't even tell people that I had seen Elliot drown that day he lost control of himself while crossing the creek to go home. I felt sorry for his father, who was a pharmacist in a nearby village, and who had to bring up both Elliot and his sister, Betsy, after his wife had left him. Betsy was a constant source of trouble, promiscuous and wild, and now he had lost his son and would probably never know he had a granddaughter.

I hid my pregnancy for as long as I could, and when it was impossible to do so any longer, I was terrified. Mama's reaction was to deny it had ever occurred. She kept it well hidden and her way of greeting the birth of my child was to declare to me and to herself that my baby was a miraculous creation, a spiritual creation, the return of Celeste. She so named her, and then, to my shock, she dyed the baby's hair so she would look like me and not have Elliot's red hair, not yet or perhaps not ever.

Now, when I looked at my baby even from this distance, seeing her beside Mama, holding her hand and looking in my direction, I saw myself as a little girl. I couldn't help believing at times that Mama was right. Celeste was my resurrection, my returning, my rebirth, a true miracle. She had my gestures, my laugh, my way of sleeping with my lips pursed and my left hand pressed flatly against my cheek.

All these thoughts, these memories, these feelings, ran through my mind like the creek that ran through our property, rising and falling not with the rain and the melting snow as did the creek, but with the storms and changes that showered on our very private world.

Today was yet another.

"Hurry up," Mama ordered when I put the garden tools aside and started toward the house.

She turned, lifted Celeste into her arms, and went into the house quickly, fleeing with her as if the sunlight were deadly. I trotted back and took off my muddied shoes. She was waiting in the hallway.

"What's wrong?" I asked, seeing the urgency in her face.

Had she seen some curse floating around us, around me? Was that why she wanted me inside quickly? It wouldn't be the first time. Too often as I grew up on the farm, and even when Noble was alive, Mama's call to us was like an alarm bell, an alert to hurry back into the safety of our home to avoid being caught in a gust of cold, dark wind, what she called the "icy breath of Death, himself." How could we not shudder and rush into her waiting warm embrace?

Baby Celeste stood there with her thumb in her mouth gazing up at me. Usually, when she was with Mama for a while, she would reflect Mama's moods and look more like her than me.

"Mrs. Paris is coming right away for some Nufem," Mama replied. r

"Oh," I said, my fears eased.

Nufem was the name Mama had given to her secret herbal supplement to relieve women of the discomforts of the menopause. I knew only that she combined things like red raspberry, passionflower, black cohosh, wild yam, and some motherwort to create her remedy. I think she added some vitamin supplements as well. She had given it to the mayor's wife, who had heard about it from Mrs. Zalkin, wife of the egg farmer who lived a few miles east of us, and now apparently Mrs. Paris, who was the wife of one of the biggest landlords in nearby Sandburg, had been talking to the mayor's wife.

Over the past year and a half, Mama had developed a number of customers for her herbal remedies and had even begun to supply herbal plants and products to a health food retail outlet in the bigger city of Middletown. She had begun this little business through her friend Mr. Bogart, the owner of an estate jewelry and spiritual gem store where she had bought Noble and me our amulets. It kept us busy, me in particular, cultivating and growing her plants and herbs and helping her grind and mix ingredients.

Mama wasn't just selling these herbal remedies, however. She would offer the customers, people she called her clients, instructions about meditating and tuning in to a peaceful coexistence with the spiritual world of nature. More and more people seemed to be interested in such things, and Mama and I, who were usually thought unusual if not downright strange, had at least become positive in some people's eyes. I know it made Mama happier.

"I want you to take Baby Celeste up to the turret room and keep her quiet," she said.

It was what I always had to do whenever anyone came to our house -- hide Baby Celeste, occupy her so she made little noise and attracted nobody's attention. Nothing was more important than keeping her existence a secret.

As if she herself understood how important it was, Baby Celeste did not cry or complain whenever I had to hide her away. If anything, my taking her up to the turret room amused her and she always kept relatively quiet. She would gaze at all the old furnishings and antiques like someone lovingly looking at religious icons in a church. I was sure any other child would have been bored, but not Baby Celeste. Her patience amazed me. Mama, of course, was not surprised by Baby Celeste's behavior at all. She believed Baby Celeste was the true heir of all the family's spiritual powers.

"She'll be even greater than I am someday," Mama had told me.

"Don't just stand there looking stupid, Noble," she snapped at me now. "I told you. The woman is on her way here. She could be coming down the driveway any moment. Hurry!"

"Okay, Mama." I scooped up Baby Celeste.

The gravity and criticality Mama had whenever she wanted Baby Celeste hidden away frightened me. I had nightmares of her being discovered and then taken from us for one reason or another. After all, what sort of people keep a baby hidden from the world? Where did the baby come from anyway? they'd wonder. Why

was her hair being dyed? If I expressed my fear about this, Mama would shake her head at me as if I were too stupid to ever know anything.

"Don't you understand that they would never let that happen, Noble?" she asked. "I would have thought you did by now."

The *they* in our lives were the spiritual family members who hovered about our farm and home, in and out, watching over us always. I didn't disbelieve her. I had seen the way they looked at us and watched over us, warning Mama of things from time to time. The way Baby Celeste looked in the direction of a family soul, and the way her eyes grew small and interested, convinced me she had already crossed over. Perhaps Mama was right about her. Perhaps she came directly from them and didn't need to cross. She was never away from them. Birth had simply been another doorway in the spiritual world for her and not as it was for the rest of us, a doorway to a lesser place, making it necessary for us to find our own way back.

"Up we go," I sang, and ascended the stairs.

Baby Celeste smiled at me and lay her head on my shoulder. I kissed her little forehead and brushed back her hair. How could anyone who saw us together not know instantly she was my child? Maybe Mama was afraid of that more than anything and that was why she grimaced whenever I did show Baby Celeste too much affection.

"You can love her, but as a brother would love a sister, as a sister," she would constantly remind me. Baby Celeste was truly locked away in the world Mama envisioned for us.

I wondered how being so confined, so isolated, would effect Baby Celeste. How long could it go on? When would it end? Or would it never end?

Rarely feeling the sunlight on her face, rarely smelling the aroma of spring flowers, hardly ever luxuriating in the soft touch of the breeze, Baby Celeste would surely be disadvantaged in ways I couldn't imagine.

And yet, when I sat with her in the turret and listened to Mama and her customer's muffled voices below, I realized how similar my plight was to my baby's. Wasn't I as trapped and shut away in the prison of Noble's identity? Rarely did I look out as I would if I were permitted to be myself. A woman's world was as distant to me as playing and being in daylight was to Baby Celeste.

"We're alike in so many ways, Celeste," I told her, whispered to her while we waited in the turret room.

She glanced at me, the tiny dimple in her cheek flashing like a small Christmas light as she tightened those sweet, small lips. Often when she looked at me or listened to me, she seemed so much older. She wore the face of someone who understood things far beyond her years. And then, an instant later, she was Baby

Celeste again, laughing and giggling at the most insignificant little things.

A ray of sunshine trapped the floating dust and she marveled at the way the particles glittered. She reached out to touch them and then laughed and looked at me to see if I had the same wonder.

I smiled.

A long time ago so many things were full of wonder for me. Stuck in the dark places now, I closed my eyes,

I lowered my head, I plodded along afraid of stepping too far to the left or too far to the right. Nothing frightened me as much as disappointing Mama. More often than ever these days, she made me feel it was only the three of us, floating on some raft in a sea of turmoil. We needed each other. We had to keep our world tightly guarded, behind tall, thick protective walls. It was only then that we would be safe.

Baby Celeste played quietly with one of her dolls while we waited. Shortly after Baby Celeste had been born, Mama had brought out the dolls Mr. Taylor Kotes, the owner of the biggest lumber company in the community, had given to me. He had courted Mama after Daddy's death, and there was a time I thought he would become our new daddy, but he was killed in a terrible car accident when a drunken teenager in a truck rammed into him on his way home from our house. I had really begun to like him, too. Even Noble, who was resistant and angry about Daddy's passing, had started to accept him.

His death reinforced some of the rumors about Mama, especially because Mr. Kotes's sister spread them. Back then she had people believing that anyone who got too close to us was in some sort of danger. Mama was beautiful and still striking. She could have had one man after another romancing her, but she didn't seem to mind our isolation. In fact, she welcomed it, especially after my supposed kidnapping. Being a former schoolteacher, she continued my homeschooling. Back in those days, I could count on the fingers of one hand how many visitors we had a month, not considering our spiritual visitors, of course.

She played our piano at night, raised her herbs and vegetables, and walked the farm with her ancestors at her side. Before I had crossed over and could really see the spirits if only occasionally, I would watch her stroll with her head slightly bowed, nodding, pausing, and gesturing to someone standing beside her. I remember straining, studying the air, searching desperately for a vision. I so wanted to be like her to see what she saw, to hear what she heard.

At dinner she would tell me things she had been told, stories from our past, episodes of sickness, accidents, love affairs, fights, an anthology of our heritage. There were young women who had had their hearts broken in love and women who had died young, as well as men who were killed in wars or suffered fatal accidents. There were many stories about my great-great-grandfather and grandmother who were buried on our property along with their unborn child. In that small square of fieldstone were three tombstones and of course Noble's or my unmarked grave long ago covered with new grass. No one but me and Mama knew it was there.

Sometimes, I would sit on the grass in the small cemetery and think about Noble lying below. I would think about our days together before the tragedy. He had had a wonderful imagination, and like Mama he never seemed lonely. His dragons and knights occupied his days. I used to be jealous of that. I thought it surely meant he would cross over long before I did, which was what Mama always expected, but the ghostly figures Noble saw were manufactured in his own mind and did not come out of the world beyond.

I didn't think Mama would like me visiting the unmarked grave, so I did it when I was confident she was too occupied to see or when she was on one of her shopping trips. I used to think how horrible it was for him to be buried and forgotten this way. Lately, I have heard him pleading from beyond, asking to be acknowledged. Until he is, he is caught in some limbo. He can't be with our daddy and he can't come back to us.

However, just the thought of telling Mama this terrifies me. I know she will see it as some sort of betrayal, and whenever she thinks that, she assumes something evil has entered the house or me. She would lock me away, make me fast, give me some secret herbal cure that would make me sick to my stomach. It didn't matter. In her mind it purged me of the evil.

My only hope is she will hear Noble's pleas herself one day, but she hasn't yet, not yet.

One of the first words Mama taught Baby Celeste was Noble. That is all Baby Celeste ever calls me. It's on the tip of my tongue when I'm alone with her to have her call me Mommy, but I'm afraid of what Mama would do to her if she ever looked at me and said such a thing in front of her. Surely, she would think evil had contaminated her and she would probably lock her away and feed her some herbal medicine designed to purge her of the darkness, too. How she would suffer. I wouldn't be able to stand it, so I don't dare put any ideas in Baby Celeste's mind.

And yet, especially when we're alone as we are now in the turret room, I catch her looking at me differently. Perhaps it's only wishful thinking on my part, but it seems to me she gazes at me the way a child lovingly gazes at her mother. She loves to throw her small arms around me and press herself to me. She can lie beside me for hours without becoming restless, and she loves falling asleep with me in my bed, whenever Mama permits her to come to my room and do so.

The Noble in me tries desperately to remain a little aloof, but he is quickly swept aside. I stroke her hair. I kiss her cheeks and forehead. I hum a lullaby. I hold her tightly and rock and close my eyes.

And I hear Noble arguing and pleading, "You can see you should stop being me. It's not fair to the baby. Get Mama to let you stop. I'm cold and it's dark and I'm afraid. Please, Celeste. Help me."

I'm crying now just thinking about it.

The tears streak down my cheeks and drip from my chin, but I do not make a sound. I hold my breath and bite down on my lower lip. An ache in my heart is growing larger and lasting longer every passing day, but what can I do to stop it? What do I dare do?

The front door opens and closes below. I hear a car's engine start and I stand up and peer out the window to watch Mrs. Paris drive away with her bundle of herbs and her newfound wisdom. She will spread the word even more and there will be additional customers. I'll be hiding up here with Baby Celeste again and again and again.

Soon after Mrs. Paris's car turns and is gone, Mama comes up the stairs and opens the turret door.

"How are my children?" she cries.

Baby Celeste smiles up at her. I hide my final tears and take a deep breath.

"We're fine, Mama," I tell her.

She picks up Baby Celeste and we descend the stairs with her listening to Mama talk about Mrs. Paris, how the woman was mesmerized by the things Mama told her. Mama reinforces and confirms what I suspected.

"She'll be happy and she'll tell others and we'll have more customers for sure, Noble. We have a lot to do. They're starting to appreciate me around here," Mama says proudly. "Your father never thought that would happen," she adds, looking out the window. Then she laughs.

I'm sure she's right about all of that and I'm happy for her. Somehow, I still can't say I'm happy for us. Perhaps I never will. There are times when I feel so terribly lost, but I can't say it. She would not understand.

She would even get angry at that.

I return to the work in the garden. The sun is sliding down the sky now. It's almost to the tip of the mountain range, and its rays thread through the woods around us, lighting up the green leaves, turning them into emeralds dangling off branches. I can almost hear the shadows stirring and unfolding like charcoal cellophane in the darkest corners.

Something takes shape and soon I am sure I see a pair of female cousins who had lived nearly two hundred years ago come out of the woods and walk toward the house. They are barefoot, but it's all right because their feet don't quite touch the ground. I see they are chatting excitedly. They want to tell Mama something, something new, or perhaps something they had forgotten to tell her the last time they had spoken. I'm sure I will hear about it at dinner tonight. They don't look my way until they are just about to the house. Then they turn and both wave. I wave back.

"Tell her to let Noble go," I whisper. "Please. If you tell her, she will listen."

They don't hear me, or if they do, the idea frightens even them. They go into the house, and for a moment or two it is as quiet as a graveyard. Then the scream of a large crow spins my head around. It rises out of the woods as if it's being chased and then veers toward the descending sun and disappears in the glare.

I cover my eyes quickly before the hot, bright light burns them. Too often these days I welcome darkness.

My brain is jumbled, mixed images rush through like visual static: Noble falling backward off the rock; Elliot waving foolishly at me; as the water carries him off, his laughter dying away; Daddy coming home from work and scooping us up into his arms and crying, "My twins, my right arm and my left"; Mr. Calhoun in our front doorway, his hat in his hands, his head bowed; Mama walking out into the darkness to speak with her spirits; and Noble smothering his cries in his pillow, his anger in his pillow.

Something has brought us here, something, as Mama often says, far greater than us. We cannot challenge or defy it. We must be who we are. It's our destiny. It flows along like the creek. I dream of it, of our blood flowing, our faces floating on the water's surface like discarded pictures.

The sound of Mama's piano flows from the house, out of any opened window, and snaps me out of this reverie. I close my eyes and listen to the melodies. Most of the time they are sad and heavy, but sometimes, she plays light, happy tunes. Sometimes, she even sings along. She's doing so tonight. She has a wonderful voice, a voice Daddy used to call angelic. It could fill us with happiness and hope and make us wonderfully content with each other, with ourselves.

Those cousins, I think, surely they must have come to her with something good, something wonderful. She'll be happy tonight. She will chatter continuously at dinner and laugh at everything Baby Celeste does or says. All the dark shadows will be swept away. It will seem like everything is really all right.

These nights, these times are special gifts, aren't they? Aren't they? Shouldn't you be grateful for every one, every hour and every minute? I ask my reluctant self.

I do not answer. There is only silence around me. Even the birds are mute and the small breeze has stopped. The whole world has been put on pause.

I suck in my breath and work on until it is time to go in to wash up for dinner and help Mama with Baby

Celeste. Noble's pleas die down behind me and get carried off in the breeze, carried into the shadows in the forest.

I cannot help him, although it makes my heart ache so. Once again, another night, I leave him buried in his unmarked grave with my name on his lips and his name branded invisibly on my forehead.

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