



**M**rs. Grosseteste put her lemonade glass back on the table and applied a small amount of powder to the tip of her nose. She then went on with her story:

“But the annual Carnival party was around the corner, and earlier that year our respective mothers had decided that the two of us should team up for the costume contest. What that meant, was that Heloise was going to be The Moon, and I—The Sun. We were to march up and down the school assembly-hall stage as if on a catwalk, and be judged as a single entry. So Heloise

and I made no further attempts to settle the matter of skinny is bad, fat is good. We had to present a united front for the contest.

The next few weeks were spent in preparations. Hers was to be, she said, the most beautiful costume the school had ever seen. I had strong reservations in that regard, first of all because she was so skinny there was no way in hell she'd look good in any outfit, let alone in a Moon costume; second of all, because it was an established fact that the Sun was much more astronomically important than the Moon, which was just Earth's satellite. It followed that a Sun outfit couldn't possibly be less resplendent than a Moon one. But I kept my reservations to myself.

On the appointed day our mothers, Heloise, and I marched to the tailor's shop on August 23d Street. We climbed a flight of stairs and found ourselves in a large sewing room adorned with wall-length mirrors and posters showing the shop people's involvement with contemporary social issues such as class struggle (these were 'Workers of the World United' and 'Through Hard Work Towards Socialism'). They also seemed to be health-conscious individuals, as demonstrated by the 'Smoking prohibited' sign, and appeared to show real concern with workplace discipline ('Quiet, please' was indicative of that). I had visited that room not long before, when my hooded jacket had been in the process of becoming the unique garment it ended up being. I was a regular.

The head-seamstress had us look at pictures of children's Carnival costumes sketched in a thick album, and lo and behold! There was a Sun outfit, and there was a Moon outfit. Well, not exactly: the picture showed a girl dressed as the Evening Star.

'It's close enough, though,' Heloise's mother said.

Indeed, it was close enough. It had the appropriate color, dark-blue, to suggest that the star belonged in a nightscape; a star-shaped silvery diadem; and silvery rays on wire supports, surrounding the waist. I immediately saw I had been wrong: Heloise's costume was going to be more spectacular than mine.

By comparison, the Sun looked modest. It was a two-piece affair comprised of golden-colored pants, a golden-colored tunic, and a golden-colored hood. True, there were golden rays on wire supports, surrounding the waist just like on her outfit, but there was no color contrast or complementarity to speak of. Obviously, the whole thing was too plain. It didn't have the spark."

Mrs. Grosseteste paused for a second and turned to Mrs. Bonaventure:

"You see what I mean, Thomasina."

Mrs. Bonaventure knew, indeed, what Mrs. Grosseteste meant, for, as the wearer of silk dresses of the highest quality of fiber and exquisite design which she'd inherited from Maria di Ritella, St. Bonaventure's mother, she was the best judge of fashion in the whole of Rivulus Dominarum. She acknowledged Mrs. Grosseteste's remark with a small nod and a sweet smile:

"Why, thank you, Roberta. But please go on."

"I don't want to be the Sun anymore," said Mrs. Grosseteste.

"You've never been the Sun," remarked Mrs. Bacon.

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous. That’s what I said to Mother on our way home. ‘I know why you’re saying that,’ Mother said, ‘it’s because you think Heloise’s costume is showy and yours is less so. Am I right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’ve got to develop a team spirit. Heloise and you are going to enter the contest as a duo. There’s more to it: you should think of the whole thing in astronomical terms. The Sun is surely more visible and more important to us than the Evening Star. We see the Sun all day long, yet only catch glimpses of the Evening Star, and that only for a couple of hours. Then we go to bed.’

Now I’d heard a version of that story earlier in life, from Father. When I was five, I had once complained about the commonness of my name: I was fine with ‘Roberta,’ but could not stand ‘Lumena,’ which was a silly name to give a child: it meant ‘Little Light,’ and kids in preschool always made fun of it, calling me names such as ‘Gas-lamp,’ ‘Little Candle,’ and the like. In short, my name had only brought trouble ever since I could remember. It was pompous and ridiculous, and it did not command the respect I deserved from my peers.

‘Why can’t I be called Stella? It’s so much more beautiful.’

In his wisdom, Father answered:

‘Oh, no, it isn’t. It suggests a luminescent, yet cold and lifeless body. There is no life on stars. They are just distant things twinkling far away in the sky, but we can never reach them. They are awake when we’re asleep, and vice-versa. Picture this:

A man travels through the woods at night. He’s tired, hungry, thirsty, and above all, cold. He’s been walking for hours, frozen to the marrow, hoping for a bed, food, water, and a fire to warm his bones. He looks at the stars and they look back at him, cold and distant. All of a sudden, the man sees a little light in the distance. The little light comes from a fire; the fire signals a house’s presence; in that house he’ll find all he longs for: heat, a bed, food, and water. Your name stands for all of these. Be happy we didn’t call you Stella.’

That made sense. It also made my first name a more desirable designation.

Therefore Mother bought the four meters of yellow satin necessary for the Sun costume, one meter of white sturdy cotton for the lining, and a zipper for the pants. Recalling Father’s words on my way to the tailor’s for our first fitting, I was somewhat comforted: a star was just a luminous body with no warmth, and only poetic value. Heloise can have her resplendent Evening Star costume; I would be content with my name and my solar status and garment.

We only won second prize in the contest. The jury decided that a tailor-made outfit didn’t deserve first place: it was the result of professionals’ work in both concept and execution, and not of our own imagination and manual skill. That, and a comment from one of the jurors really pissed me off. The lady-juror said:

‘I don’t know why chubby children should be dressed in light-colored, shiny fabrics. It makes them look even chubbier than they really are.’



Illustrations:

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Mrs. Grosseteste's mother's notebook, showing expenses (February 1963) including fabrics and the zipper for the Sun costume. © Roberta Grosseteste