Elizabeth, Who Calls Herself Mimi

Adam Mumy

Western Michigan University
ELIZABETH, WHO CALLS HERSELF MIMI

Adam Mumy

Inside a desk drawer
tears wait under post-its
and a box of crayons

Forgotten

Pieces of paper not yet yellowed with age

Ink and lead is absorbed
spread across the pages like blood drained away
I
Love
You

A hand begins to tremble
The letters laugh darkly
Always
Ever
Yours

The notes are crawling
and creeping up her arms
her neck
the final goal

achieved

Slowly tightening –
her breath is gone
She folds in tears
as pieces of paper
not yet yellowed with age
flap
innocently on the floor
Elizabeth, who lives across the street from us and who dances all the time, calls herself Mimi. She wears gypsy dresses and tells me stories: shopping carts weren’t popular when they were first invented. Mr. Heady wears high heels when no one is looking. My sister has one working eye.

Sometimes, when my mom wakes up, her hair is like brown and yellow wires that stick up in the air. She always smells like charcoal and cologne and she always sends me outside to play. Just go she says and her voice is dry and cracked like her bottom lip and I go like a heavy mule. I go outside, down our front steps, cross Ormes road and up to Mimi’s crooked front porch. It’s like a silent movie until I knock.

Elizabeth, who calls me Tommy and who I call Mimi, is not a gypsy. She’s part Dutch. “The Dutch part of me says my last name, Oser, but the French part of me says Oh-zay.” She tells me this and we drink raspberry iced tea on her porch while enjoying the sun and the French part of her last name.

Mimi has never been to France, but she said that when she was in ninth grade, her teacher, Mme Hackett, who wasn’t French at all, let everyone in the class choose their own French name. Elizabeth chose Mimi because she loved the way the name made her think of the streets of Paris, sprinkled with women in mink jackets, kissing on both cheeks, bonjour. She never told anyone why she loved the name so much.

“Even the award that I won,” she told me. “At the end of the school year for getting the highest grade in the class said, ‘Ce certificat est présenté à Mlle Mimi Oser.’

Even the award called her Mimi.

Everyone calls Elizabeth by her French name except for Mrs. Hagadorn, who calls her Lizzy or sometimes Betty, but never Elizabeth and never Mimi. Mrs. Hagadorn sits in her kitchen and smokes cigarettes until the kitchen itself is filled up with smoke, just like her lungs. She smokes and smokes and calls Elizabeth Lizzy, not Mimi. Elizabeth doesn’t mind though, Mrs. Hagadorn is
old and smokes too much and after all, 
Lizzy isn’t that bad of a name.

Mimi did mind when Luke Peterson 
would call her Betty because he knew 
better. He knew that she loved the name 
Mimi, even though he didn’t know why, 
and he still called her Betty. We don’t live in 
France, Betty. We live in Ohio, Luke would 
say and then take her in his arms and 
smile, hoping she would accept this the 
way she accepted many things he did, like 
using all of the hot water before she could 
take a shower, and not putting that little 
metal cup with holes in its side and bottom 
back in the drain in the kitchen sink, and 
then letting wet noodles and cereal clog 
everything up. She would dig the noodles 
and cereal out of the drain with a dirty 
fork, and she would ask herself why the 
wet streets of France weren’t kissing her 
window, why old men with white 
moustaches and big bellies weren’t walking 
past her home.

She would tell our neighbor, Janice 
Crawley, who drinks tequila at night and 
cries, that Luke doesn’t call her Mimi and 
Janice would say, Mimi is not an easy name 
for a man to say, and Mimi would shake 
her head and Janice would tell Mimi about 
her ex-husband’s yellow toenails and how 
he snored too loudly. Mimi tells me that 
Janice isn’t sad, but sometimes love can be 
heavy, like a sac of oats.

Mimi accepted many things about Luke 
but when he started coming home late, she 
couldn’t accept this.

I could see from my house.

Two headlights that were crooked and 
yellow would slide over the chipped blue 
paint of Mimi’s house. Sometimes a light 
from inside would come on and stay on, 
and sometimes Mimi would come outside 
on her front porch and cross her arms and 
stand like a pillar of salt. One night, when 
Luke came home late, Mimi used a 
wooden baseball bat that she stole from 
Brandon Decker when she was fourteen,