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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, M’me 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 Crawly, 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, I