

Clem

My younger sister Lori is getting married next week and I'm driving up to Kingston to stay with her. His name is James. He's a doctor. They're getting married next week because Lori wanted a June wedding and things tend to get done her way. She's upset the flowers. She wanted white orchids.

"It's wonderful to have a doctor in the family," my mother told me on the phone, sometime late that morning, the morning a ring was produced somewhere in the middle of Grand Central Station. It was a Monday.

When we were a lot younger, Lori told me that she didn't believe in public proposals. I don't remember exactly when she said this but I remember that we were somewhere in Florida, and that we were in a hotel room.

That was originally my belief, the insincerity of public proposals, which I had taken from mom and used to practice on Lori for a time. I wanted people to know that I had lived in the world long enough and had seen enough things to have likes and dislikes.

It makes sense that Lori would marry a doctor. She files her nails, she has a nine o'clock bedtime. She labels her things.

I like doctors. I like their clean teeth and their prescriptions. They look good when their sleeves are rolled to their elbows. They look very gallant.

The first time I met James, I had it vaguely in my head that he was going to come to dinner in his doctor's uniform. He came in a very different outfit. He wore Converse. He ordered a Lagunitas IPA. Over fried pickles, his choice, he told us that he had always

wanted to be an actor. He didn't talk about dosages, IV drips, body mass index. He hugged me when dinner was over; he didn't shake my hand.

They had arrived fifteen minutes late. Lori was angry the whole dinner. When he left to go to the bathroom, she told me that she wasn't, but I always know when Lori is angry. She has a thing about lateness.

They sold their apartment in Staten Island a few years ago. They live in a real house now. That's fine with me because until then James hadn't been off my mind and it's a lot better that we can only speak through the phone, and only mediated by Lori, when she says things like 'James it's Clem say hi.' He would either be chopping things in the kitchen or running out the door but he would always stop what he was doing and do what she told him, which was to say hi. That's how we talk to each other now and it's much better. I had never seen James in a doctor's uniform before and I'm not sure that Lori has, either. And it would be strange to ask.

Here are some things about me. My name is Clem. That's not short for anything. I live alone. I have an astigmatism. I work with Letitia and Mauricio. They hold painting classes for children after school on Thursdays, in their studio, which they bought together in 1994. They told me this fact when I came to work one morning. It was their anniversary.

I've been with them for four years. They're comfortable leaving me with the studio keys. I stay after hours sometimes because I like to clean. I like washing the oil and acrylic paint off the brushes, recycling the newspaper used for keeping paint off the

tables, taking inventory of colors that need to be restocked. There is never enough black paint. And purple hardly ever needs refilling. These are just some things that I've noticed.

Marco is nine years old. He arrives consistently twenty-minutes late to class and he makes teeth marks on the brushes because he's always chewing on the ends. I don't see the problem, but Mauricio tells me that he doesn't want brushes in the studio that look too old or too low quality. So sometimes I have to throw them away. But sometimes I keep them for myself.

"Don't you ever want to do anything else?" my father asked me. Or asks me. It's a question that seems to be on his mind a lot of the time, whenever we talk.

"No. Not really," I say. It's the truth. I never liked to think of doing anything else.

Lori wants me to get out more. Those are her words. She wants me to be more social. She thinks that I don't have a particularly easy time expressing myself.

Somebody else had said that about me, that I was painfully shy. That's what an aunt said, or maybe it was one of my mother's friends. It was a woman and she said it when I was a lot younger.

Cold and withholding. That was another one, when I was a lot older, but I don't remember who said that.

I used to draw. My dad once bid on a two-hundred-Crayon set from eBay for a dollar ninety-nine, and I checked in with him every night after he came home from work, asking if we'd won, if we'd won. When he figured that I was old enough to handle it, he told me that it was an easy win, that nobody else had actually bid on it.

“Do you remember that?” I had asked him on the phone, maybe last month.

“A little bit,” he said.

“They were crayons. It was the Ultimate 200-Crayon Bucket. On eBay.”

“I don’t think I remember that, no,” he said.

Krista was my kindergarten teacher. She asked my mom once, after school, if she had ever heard of synesthesia.

I didn’t know what synesthesia was. I had first thought of anesthesia. I was allergic. My parents learned this about me when I had undergone surgery for a back tooth, which had gotten chipped and then infected after I chewed on a resin charm.

This was before Lori was born. I had a bad reaction. I woke up swollen and delusional and I yelled that the nurse had hideous hair, ‘hideous’ being a word that I picked up somewhere, maybe from one of the movies that I was always watching.

When I learned this fact about myself, that I had synesthesia, I told everyone at school with the pride of having discovered some kind of superpower and most of them thought that I was making it all up. Sometimes, I was.

“What color do you see for my name?”

Alex had asked me that. He was someone that I had a strong desire to impress.

“Shamrock green,” I told him, even though I didn’t think of green when I thought of Alex’s name. I didn’t think of any color when I thought of Alex’s name. I didn’t know

what a shamrock was, but it was printed on one of my crayons, and like the word ‘hideous,’ it sounded impressive.

“Also, I love you,” I added, excited by the fact that we had interacted.

“Okay,” he said.

“I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

“Okay,” he said.

I think about our parents. Dad used to sometimes massage my mother’s feet on the couch after work, and she sometimes used to let him smoke his pipe, as long as he kept the windows open, and as long as Lori and I weren’t in the same room.

“This is called ‘compromise’ and it’s very healthy,” my mom told Lori and me. She told us the same things about arguing, when she and Dad would argue. They argued about migraine pills, bad backs, expiration dates on food, night guards, taxes.

Lori and James argue about different things: toilet seats, insensitivity, keys, losing things. I don’t ever imagine James getting angry. Doctors don’t fight. They write prescriptions, they have signatures that people can’t read, they are generally unemotional.

I had told Lori on the phone last night that I was going to get to their house at four. It’s four forty-five now and I’m still on the highway. She wants me to get there early and help with dinner. Lori likes to cook and likes to host. She goes to farmers’ markets. She buys organic. She buys cheese, red wine, olives, vegetables. Oysters. She likes the lake. She likes log cabins and porches and whicker chairs now. She likes to dine *al-fresco* and she likes people to know how much she likes to dine *al-fresco*.

I used to be constantly hungry. I could never get full. I wanted to eat everything; I ate my scabs, watermelon rinds, soy sauce packets and duck sauce from empty takeout containers, seaweed off the beach of Santa Monica when we visited mom's family, Mango's kibble that one time, when I had wanted to know what kibble tasted like. When my parents were away somewhere in Europe, maybe for their anniversary, my babysitter left her rosary on the nightstand and I put the beads in my mouth when she was in the bathroom. They were tiny, red and translucent. They looked like berries, the kinds that forest fairies might eat or put in each other's hair.

In the old apartment, the one we'd all lived as a family, I had a window in my room. I would keep it open and just sit there a lot and think about all the things that I wanted to eat. Carrot cake, chicken thighs, garlic, sausage, jars of rainbow sprinkles, bacon. Sometimes I had specific things in mind. Things that I'd heard mentioned at tables, in adult conversations, in books, in movies, sometimes in comics, sometimes in video games. Things like space strawberries, lobster thermidor, frogs legs.

"What do you want. What are you thinking," my dad asked me once, during a family dinner at The Ivy, in California, with mom's extended family. Dad always got pushed to the end of the table with the children.

"Lobster thermidor."

"Lobster thermidor." He closed his menu and looked at me. "Why lobster thermidor. What is this lobster thermidor. Where do you get these ideas."

"I want to try," I said.

The creature came dead in the shell, in the rest of its body. Its legs had hair on them. When I didn't touch it, Dad tried to help me cut it. There was something inside, maybe a beet, but I thought that it looked like a lung.

"A lung. It's not a lung. Jesus Christ." He was angry. "You ordered it, now you have to eat it."

I used to sit at the window and want things. I wanted foods high in sugar and salt, sidebangs, peaches, long legs, sour strings, a cigarette, a banana-yellow bathing suit, a prettier name. I wanted glamour and to be kissed very long and very hard.

Lori is five years younger than me. I used to think about how easily she could just fold her clothes and put them in her drawers and go to sleep on command while I lied awake at the window wanting things.

I take a right turn onto their driveway. They have a driveway now. I think about what I'm going to tell Lori. I think about how James is going to greet me. A handshake or a hug.

At the mouth of the driveway, I turn off the car and flip down the mirror to look at myself. My eyelashes are thin. They get this way when I'm dehydrated or haven't taken vitamins. I put some bobby pins into my hair. Someone, maybe a relative, maybe my mother, I'm not really sure, used to tell me when I was younger that I looked so nice when my hair was away from my face. But that was a long time ago.