

Jennifer Clark

MANGO JESUS

I.

Ever since my sister bought her iPhone I've been bombarded with irrelevant, obtuse references to nothing in particular.

Almost daily she sends pictures of her two-year old son, King. Holly occasionally intersperses cryptic messages and photos of something else. Lately, I've received a rash of myself or, more accurately, parts of myself—my bare foot, yawning mouth, part of my ear. Pieces of myself I do not recall giving away.

One time I caught her in the act. We were eating bagels or rolls, I don't recall exactly what, but whatever it was it had poppy seeds, one of which lodged between my teeth. As I slipped my pinky into my mouth, attempting—I thought rather unobtrusively to rake out the annoying seed—my sister snapped a picture. With fingernail still wedged between teeth, my words came out muddied. “Wha’ did you jus’ do?”

“Nnn-nottt-thing,” Holly stuttered through spurts of laughter.

“Let me see that,” I said and reached for her phone. She jerked the phone away but was thoughtful enough to turn it around so I could view the screen.

I don't know why people are fond of cell phones with cameras in them. Personally, I don't like seeing my world shrunk to the size of a pea. I find it disorienting.

Before I had my bearings, I briefly thought that instead of looking at a close up of my teeth, complete with poppy poop I was looking at a bowling ball lodged between spare pins. Holly hugged the phone to her chest then snuck a peek of my teeth displayed on her screen, causing her to chortle like a rabid chicken.

“Delete it,” I demanded. “I don't want my miniature teeth, with or without poppy seeds to be ‘out there.’”

“I just did,” she snorted.

“You deleted it?”

“Yes.”

Though she was still cackling when I left, I chose to believe her.

II.

Today’s email she has entitled “Self.”

Before I open this, or any of her emails, I amuse myself by playing a little game. I read Holly’s subject line and begin guessing what the subject matter is *really* about. This isn’t as easy as it sounds. Take, for example, yesterday’s email. Entitled, “Tom,” I thought she was sending me a picture of Tom, my son. It seemed only logical. But then, I remembered: this is my sister and logic is not her strong point. And, even though we live in the same town, she hasn’t seen my kid for several weeks. She could have, under the cover of dusk, driven over, crept up to our house, crouched under a window and with one hand held high, procured an image of Tom. I wouldn’t put it past her. But then it crossed my mind that the message might have something to do with a recipe. A dish made with tomatillos, perhaps and thus, from her perspective, the aptly titled “Tom.” My mind waffled back and forth—my son or a recipe, a recipe or my son? Finally, I decided that “Tom” was about a recipe.

I was wrong. “Tom” was about her being sick with a cold and having an ear infection. No picture was attached. She was, it occurred to me hours later, sending a nod to Tom who only weeks before had a similar infection. I realized that her discomfort with calling attention to herself in real life spills into the cyber world. “Tom” was her attempt to shift attention away from herself. Shoot. Another game lost.

I’m now musing over today’s subject heading of “Self.” I say the word aloud. “Self. Self. Self,” hoping to stumble into the correct answer. Hmmm. Holly’s entering day two of being sick and holed up with an ear infection. “Self.” I’ve got it. She’s snapped a picture of her sick self. I imagine her splayed upon the couch, a blanket pulled up around her shoulders. I’m going to win this one.

I am wrong. “Self” is her son, King, in a high chair, inspecting a half naked orange. “Self” is not her. It’s him. He is the “Self” she is referencing. My mistake was not taking that leap with her at the very

start. My sister may not be logical, but she is selfless. Self, in her world, is not her. It never is.

King must have partially peeled back the skin of the orange himself. Himself. Holly felt compelled to whip out her phone and snap picture #8,984. She captioned—at least in her mind—the essence of the moment with the word “Self” and emailed her son away. At least that’s how I figure it.

III.

She’s into peeling lately. She sent a link to “How Jesus Would Peel a Mango.” The subject heading of this email was “LOL.” I guessed correctly—that she thought something was Laughing Out Loud funny. I watched the clip on YouTube. It’s just some guy—his hands actually—cutting into a mango. That’s about it. While it’s not offensive, neither is it funny. It’s just boring, but apparently, Holly found it so hysterical she posted a link to it on her blog—a blog, by the way, which I am not permitted to read. “I need to feel free to write whatever I want,” she has told me whenever I have asked for the link. I’ve stopped asking.

IV.

We met up for happy hour at our parent’s home a few days later.

“Did you watch the clip?” she inquired.

“Yes.”

“And?” I can tell from the way her eyebrows twitch that she is holding back a laugh so we can laugh together.

“And it isn’t funny.”

“Yes it is.”

“No. It’s really not.”

“Okay,” my sister said. I thought she was about to reconsider. Instead, she pulled out her phone and made me watch it all over again, this time, narrating the whole thing.

“Notice how he is in a garage,” she said, pointing, her finger and blotting out the Jesus man who is cutting the mango. “Jesus,” she explained, “was a carpenter and this guy—” she starts to giggle. “This

guy, he's in the garage. It's perfect."

Call me a dullard, but I didn't see the connection between Jesus and garages.

I pulled out my reading glasses to magnify this diminutive mango world. Perhaps I was missing something.

"See? See right there? He's slicing the mango into the shape of a cross." She grabbed her belly. Tried not to laugh. "See, he's doing it again! He's holding it out now, offering it to you." She cast me a sideways, expectant look. Her body started to twitch.

"It's not funny," I said.

"You just don't understand subtle humor."

"Subtle? It's so subtle it's not even there. It is not funny."

"Yes it is," she countered. With shoulders trembling, Holly emitted a series of staccato squeals. King toddled up to Holly and furrowed his face. He looked alarmed and who could blame him. His mother's face had turned magenta and she doubled over like she was passing a kidney stone. When she finally rose, tears were dancing down her face. She exploded with laughter.

I can't even describe her laugh. It is terribly infectious. King looked noticeably relieved. His brow smoothed, he thrust his head back and hooted loudly, attempting to mimic his mother. Holly only laughed harder. I started to laugh and before long we were both laughing so hard, King hooting along with us, that I had to run to the bathroom before I peed my pants.

Just thinking about Holly laughing out loud, especially about something as unfunny as the Jesus clip has me laughing again. It's not funny. At all. She just has that affect on people.

If you don't believe me, try this experiment. Just go some Saturday to Meijer Grocery Store. The one on Gull Road in Kalamazoo. After purchasing goat cheese and prosciutto get in her lane. When it's your turn, place your items calmly on the conveyer belt and say, "I was wondering if you have a mango and cheeses?" If this doesn't elicit a response take it one step further. Say, "Jesus peeled a mango and I want to be like Jesus." Or something like that.

I promise you will leave the store laughing.

V.

I, like my sister, believe I attach subject titles that are germane to the content of my emails. Unlike my sister, they really are associated. Take this one for example.

My subject heading was: Sweet Conversation Overheard. The content was as follows:

Hi Holly: Tom and his friend, Brady are playing in the living room. I'm in dining room.....this is what I overhear.....

"Hey, Brady, you want to see some new ministers?"
(I assume, though can not see, that Tom is rummaging through his dad's mail for a church bulletin.)

"What's a minister?"

"A minister is someone who preaches."

"Preaches?"

"Teaches you about Jesus."

Silence. Then, "Tom, do you think Jesus is really real?"

"Yes."

"He's probably not living right now, right?"

"Jesus is. He's probably living in Heaven."

"Yeah."

In my sister's world, Jesus is lurking in someone's garage.

VI.

My brother—who lives in North Carolina and didn't find Jesus peeling a mango funny either—sent out an email yesterday with the subject line: Guess who gotta hair cut while mamma is gone? I click on photo.jpg and erupt into laughter. On a white bathroom countertop, scrawled out in hairy brown letters is "W i L L." I'm laughing because this is funny. I envision my brother, slouched over the bathroom countertop, his long fingers neatly arranging his son's freshly clipped hair into a demented, hairy looking version of his name. He is too absorbed in the creation of his furry sculpture to respond to his son's repeated inquiry into what he is doing. Eventually my brother thrusts his hand out, says, "Will, grab my camera, please."

I feel a bit bad for my sister-in-law. She's in some hotel in Idaho and this is the scene that greets her when she opens her email. Her son's name spelled out in his own locks. No picture is attached of what he looks like now after daddy cut his hair. I feel guilty that I can't stop laughing.

The shaggy "i" in W i L L reminds me of the steamy hairball I accidentally stepped on yesterday morning. If I were my sister I would have taken a picture of the bottom of my foot, streaked with cat yak and emailed it to 300 of my closest friends, maybe even posted it on my blog, if I had a blog.

VII.

I shouldn't be so hard on my sister. There was that time she picked my son up from school when he had a half day and fired off a series of emails with attached photos that matched their subject title. First was "Got him" with a corresponding photo of Tom in the backseat of her car with King. An hour later came "Cheese" and it was a picture of Tom eating grilled cheese. Fifteen minutes after that, "What's left?" A still-life of a splotch of hardened cheese and a nibbled rind of bread crust against a green plate. I braced myself for the next subject title: "Look what I did!" I decided she's sent me a photo of a bird's eye view of a toilet bowl containing my son's droppings. It turned out to be Tom and King, arm in arm, standing proudly before a tower of blocks.

She broke her sense making streak by hurling an enigmatic email entitled, "Or."

I lost that game, too. "Or" in my sister's world turned out to be a snapshot of trees. In the foreground, is dappled grass. "Or?" I wondered. "Or what?" Above the picture she had typed, apparently to clarify the "Or": *Turn around and see this...cabin left at ten o'clock.*

Turn around where? What cabin? Left from whose point of view? Maybe she's referencing the cabin in her husband's family I'm not supposed to know about. The one in the northern Leelanau Peninsula that she and her family occasionally slip away to for weekend getaways.

"How long have you had this cabin?" I asked when my mother alluded to it.

“None of your business,” my sister said as she threw my mother a glare, my mother mouthing back, “Sorry.”

“Why?” I asked Holly. “Are you running some secret operation out of it?”

“No.”

“Why then not tell me?”

“Because you would show up.”

“To your secret cabin?”

“Yes, and you’d drag your whole family with you.”

“I’ve never shown up somewhere I wasn’t invited.”

“Oh, but you would if you could.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you would.”

“We live only three miles from each other,” I reminded her. “Never once have I shown up on your doorstep uninvited.”

“But you could.”

“But I don’t.”

“You can stop by,” she said. “Whenever. I’d love that.”

“We’ll I won’t. Just like I won’t drive five hours to your cabin unannounced.”

“Six.”

“What?”

“It’s six hours to get there. But I’m not telling you how to get there. I don’t want you just showing up.”

She will never tell me where this cabin is just like she won’t tell where her blog exists.

I start thinking about how funny it would be to uncover the location of her secret cabin. Just to rile her I might drive six hours and show up unannounced, family in tow.

I’m grinning so hard my face hurts.

VIII.

Freshman year of college I signed up for a “Logic & Reasoning” class and quickly felt like a victim of a ‘bait and switch’ scheme. Week after week I entered a foreign land where the professor spoke complete gibberish. I barely passed the class and blamed my grade on poor teaching

but now, over twenty years later, it occurs to me that maybe it was me. While I consider myself to be more logical than my sister, this is like saying, “The Brachiosaurus was bigger than the 75-foot Apatosaurus.” If it took me decades to arrive at this insight into me, my Self with a capital S, what else am I missing? I start worrying what it is that I do that could be considered odd.

My husband would know. During dinner I feel him out about it. “Honey?”

“Mm, hmmm,” he replies, chewing his food.

“I’ve been thinking about, well, you know how my sister is a prolific sender of cryptic emails and we now learn my brother has a penchant for scrawling words with hair. So, I’m wondering, what odd thing do I do? Or,” I hear a hopeful note creep into my voice, “maybe I don’t do anything strange?”

“You have to admit, your brother is damn funny.” This is all he says. We both start laughing.

IX.

I married a man who is quite logical. And direct. After watching some guy in a garage slice a mango, my husband, without laughing, emailed Holly. “You need to get a hobby,” he wrote.

My sister and I both thought that was funny.