

WHAT THINGS --- MEAN

SOPHIA N. LEE



SCHOLASTIC

Copyright © Sophia N. Lee 2016
All rights reserved.

Published by Scholastic Singapore, operating under Grolier International Inc., 81 Ubi Avenue 4, #02-30 UB. One, Singapore 408830. Grolier International Inc. is a subsidiary of Scholastic Inc., New York, 10012 (USA). No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without permission of the publisher.

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

ISBN: 978-981-09-4054-6

Printed in Malaysia

First printing, May 2016

Editor: Daphne Lee

Proofreader: Lim Jo Earn Joel

Cover art & design: Chok Yi Ning

The text of this book is set in 11 points Adobe Caslon Pro

*For my grandparents Jose and Josefina, and Benita and Tomas.
And for my parents Donn and Virginia, who began,
so that I could continue.*

For you, who have yet to decide just who you want to become.

Contents

Jars	1
Pickles	6
Cut	9
Stories	16
Close	28
Quiet	34
Space	37
Gone	48
News	54
Place	58
Salvage	64
Ineffable	68
Brushes	70
Bristles	73
Makeup	76
Make Up	85
Stamps	91

Preserve	96
Lines	100
Boxes	104
Beans	107
Maps	112
Forks	116
Feet	119
Mirrors	121
Coats	126
Present	128
Olives	130

JARS

Jar \ˈjär\

intransitive verb

- 1 a: to make a painful or disturbing sound
- b: to have displeasing or disturbing effect
- c: to be a cause of conflict or dissonance
- 2: to shake, as in to unsettle

transitive verb

- 1: to cause one to be upset: as in ruffle

noun

- 1 a: a state of being in conflict
- b: a painful or disturbing sound
- 2 a: a startling vibration or shaking
- b: a disconcerting blow
- c: an unpleasant disruption or clash in rhythm, flow, or sequence

noun

1: an open-mouthed container, usually made of glass

JARS are easy things to open. Not for everybody, as it turns out, but for me – piece of cake. I've been opening jars for as long as I can remember.

Eight. That was how old I think I was when I opened a jar for the first time. It was a jar of dill pickles that Auntie Jo bought for me during a trip to the grocery – my reward for being such a good little girl the whole day. (I took my nap and ate all my vegetables and did my homework and took a bath without much prodding.)

I remember then how she asked me over and over, was I sure that was what I wanted? Wouldn't I prefer a pack of chocnut – those crumbly, sugared peanut and chocolate bars that my cousins so loved, or a box of polvoron perhaps? Everyone at home certainly liked those salty-sweet milk candies a lot. Me, not so much. Those things made me cough. A lot. I shook my head no. I wanted those strange, alien-looking things that looked like green bloated fingers.

Mama too found my choice strange, after I had shown her my good-girl bonus. I found her in the garage, checking under the hood of Boxy Roxy, our old box-type Lancer (I named her myself). She was banging on a lot of things and muttering things to herself and I knew that meant something was wrong with the car. Again. I don't know why, but I thought that seeing those crazy-looking pickles would cheer her up. It didn't.

'Why would you choose pickles of all things?' Mama asked me in that voice she used whenever I was being naughty. I lowered my gaze, stared at my feet – the same way I did when I was being scolded – only this time, I didn't know why. I couldn't give her an answer. I stopped feeling like I was a good girl then. I could hear the sounds of my cousins along with the other kids outside, playing *patintero* or *agawan* base somewhere out on the street. They had not napped, had not done their homework or taken a bath, had not won a trip to the grocery like I did – but in that moment, I wished I had followed them instead.

'You make sure you eat all of that, or else,' she told me. She dropped Roxy's red-orange metal hood and it snapped shut with a resounding thud. I walked to the kitchen in silence. I wasn't sure if Mama was upset with me or not. I didn't think so. I held out the jar for her to open.

Mama shook her head no. 'You open it,' she told me.

I turned it and turned it and the lid wouldn't budge. I felt like I was being punished, but I didn't know why. I couldn't understand how someone could get so mad about pickles. They were just pickles.

'I'm not strong enough to open it,' I said. I put the jar of pickles on the counter. They didn't look so cool to me anymore.

She didn't open my jar. Instead, Mama opened the cupboard and took out a jar of pasta sauce. She swirled it in her hand, tilted it to its side, then she slammed it upside down on the kitchen table. It gave out a loud pop when it hit the surface. Once the jar was turned right side up, she opened it without much effort. 'Strength comes in different ways, Olive,' she told me.

I banged my jar of pickles upside down on the counter. I tried opening it again and heard the triumphant pop as the lid turned under my fingers. I pulled out a pickle and I bit into it, the juice dripping down my hand, the sound of that first crunch filling the silence in our small kitchen. The pickle was sour, like a shot of vinegar in my mouth, and then it was salty, sweet, and spicy all at the same time. My face puckered up from the taste of it. Mama was quiet, but I could see that she was waiting for me to say something.

I smiled and licked my fingers. 'I like it,' I said to her.

‘Figures,’ she said as she watched me eat another.

My pickle stash is hidden in the back end of the highest shelf in the kitchen. At fourteen, I am the only one tall enough to reach that shelf without having to climb a chair to get there. The jar sits beside a long-forgotten can of refried beans that’s probably as old as I am. I swirl it in my hand and then I plop it upside down onto the counter, and then it opens fine. I eat the pickles one by one and suck the juice from my fingers. I wash my hands three times to get rid of the smell.

I don’t remember when I started hiding the pickles – only that it seemed to upset Mama whenever she saw me eating them. I didn’t ask why.

PICKLES

Pickle \ˈpi-kəl\

noun

- 1: a liquid mixture used to preserve or clean: as
 - a: a liquid solution made of salt water or vinegar in which foods are preserved
 - b: a liquid mix of chemicals intended for industrial cleaning purposes
- 2: a difficult situation: dilemma
- 3: a fruit or vegetable preserved in brine or vinegar; commonly a cucumber

transitive verb

- 1: to marinate in a solution meant to preserve or clean a fruit or vegetable

NOBODY in the house likes pickles except for me. Not Lola Araceli, nor Mama, not Mama's elder sister Auntie Jo nor her daughter Stella, not Mama's younge sister Auntie Pat nor her daughter Louanna. Add that to the growing list of differences between me and everyone else here.

In the house, the people I get along with best are the men: there's Uncle Sol, Auntie Jo's husband and my cousin Stella's father, and Uncle Ricky, Auntie Pat's sometimes husband and Louanna's part-time dad. I like having them around. When they're here, I don't stick out so much. It's too bad that they aren't around most of the time. Uncle Sol works on a ship for 11 months out of the year and Uncle Ricky ... well, he comes and he goes.

There are some kids at school who are always so overdramatic – sighing and cooing about how they might as well be adopted. I am not one of those girls. I don't sigh and I don't coo and I keep my doubts to myself. I don't declare empty phrases like 'My family doesn't understand me!' or 'My mom doesn't know who I really am!' I study the facts and I understand them, so when I think those things, I know in my bones that they are true.

Some clues are more obvious than others. I don't look anything like them at all. Everyone here looks like Lola Celi –

cream-coloured skin and hazel eyes, fine light brown hair falling straight past their shoulders. Mama, her sisters, and my cousins all have the same upturned Patrician noses, the same Cupid's bow mouths. I am brown-skinned and black haired, and my curls never seem to grow past my shoulders, no matter how long I grow them out.

At five feet ten inches, I am unusually tall for my age. I am unusually tall for my family. But unlike the rest of them, I am the only one who is not Good At Sports. Mama was captain of the volleyball team; Auntie Jo passed her soccer skills on to Stella. Auntie Pat and Louanna are tennis doubles champions in our district. Even Lola was a cheerleader of sorts back in the day. I am so bad at sports that I can't play any of them – not even if my life depended on it. My life kind of does, anyhow, in an inverse sort of way because I am asthmatic. Make me run and I'll practically drop dead before you. Everyone thinks it's a shame I can't play basketball even though I'm so tall. I wish I were shorter so they wouldn't have to ask.

In our house, I am the only reminder that my father was ever here.

CUT

Cut \ˈkət\

transitive verb

- 1: to pierce through, prune, or pare a certain material using a sharp-edged tool
- 2 a: to split into smaller parts
b: to reduce the length or size of something by deleting other parts
c: to avoid something by going around it or making a detour
- 3: to decrease the amount of resources used
- 4 a: to halt or conclude immediately
b: to interject or cause an interruption
- 5 a: to cause one physical injury using a sharp-edged tool
b: to offend or upset someone's feelings
- 6: to evaluate something by means of close analysis
- 7: to miss attendance of an event or activity
- 8: to ease off or give way to someone

intransitive verb

- 1: to strike by using a sharp instrument
- 2: to be split or severed from something by means of cutting
- 3: to be physically or emotionally wounded by hurtful words
- 4: to be of significant effect or importance
- 5 a: to travel rapidly
b: to move forward by going around others before you

noun

- 1: the result of the act of cutting, such as an incision or wound made by a sharp-edged tool
- 2: the action of cutting something
- 3: the act of eliminating someone or something from a larger whole
- 4: referring to one's portion or share
- 5: an intended absence from an event or activity

I LIKE cutting things and then putting them together. Newspapers, magazines, those brochures that people shove in your face whenever you're walking through the mall on a weekend – anything that has pictures and words on them, really.

I like looking at them and seeing what else they could be. I think about where else these shapes and words could fit, what other pictures they could form, if they might make better sense when placed with something else.

I have stacks of books devoted to this – different photo albums and sketchpads showing things that I find interesting: glamorous places that I want to visit, different rooms and houses that I find beautiful, things I would like to be in the future, that sort of thing. I cut out pictures of things I might like and then I glue different parts of them together. It's a bit like arranging all these pieces of a puzzle, except that the picture of it is in my head and the parts of it come from things that you wouldn't necessarily put together.

It all started with a school project that we were given, freshman year of high school. Our teacher, Mrs Zeta, asked us to make these dream books that we were meant to fill with pictures and stories of future things we wanted for our lives. We were meant to look at these books every day, not just think of them in our minds. She told us that visualizing these things gave us power, made the dreams more real and closer to our reach because we could literally see them with our eyes.

That first dream book had mostly small dreams in them. I filled a lot of pages with pictures of clothes, worn by girls who

had enough moxie to pull them off. There were pages with haircuts I thought I might like, the kind that might work if my hair was straight or my face a bit smaller. There were pages with things I hoped to get on birthdays and Christmases: first editions of my favourite books, a better phone, a new laptop, a good camera, a new shelf – things that I could at least picture myself getting. The kind of dreams that didn't leave you disappointed.

Honestly, I didn't think too much about the exercise. I thought it was all a bunch of hooey until I read this story in a magazine. It was about a woman who used collages as a way of making herself less lonely. She filled her saddest moments with other people's happy ones – pictures of picnics and parties and vacations, dream homes, even images of the kind of man she might like to marry. She collaged her way into her dream life and found them all. The man she ended up marrying even looked a lot like the men in her vision boards. That made a believer out of me.

Of all the dream books I have made, one stands out as my favourite: it is a green leather scrapbook labeled 'Possibilities'. I have filled its pages with things both strange and ordinary. A girl reading on a couch on the moon. A boy dancing with a star in the sky. A little girl picking flowers on a field of clouds. But in that book, there is also this: a mother and daughter laughing their

heads off together, a father walking his daughter down the aisle, a family portrait with everyone looking happy, and no one looking out of place.

I spend the afternoon cutting things out from Stella's magazine. It's a really old one so I know she won't mind. Besides, everyone else is sprawled out beside me, but they're all distracted because they're watching the big basketball game. Basketball (of all ball-related team sports) is the biggest thing in our house, and games are treated like special occasions. We have fish balls and squid balls. And *kropek*. And *chicharon*. And lots of vinegar to dip everything in.

Lola Celi is on the lounge chair with the foot stool. Mama, my two aunts, and Louanna are on the big couch. Stella's draped on the comfy sofa chair. And I am cross-legged on the floor next to them. I don't mind. I tell them I prefer it because it's farther from the television, and I need the extra space to lay my pictures out.

I have learnt to see my family this way: as a separate thing apart from me. Whether it is at my cousins' games or at church, at school, the mall, or some other special occasion, I have learnt to hold myself at a distance – to always walk a few steps behind them, stand a few paces away. I feel more comfortable like this. It hurts less this way. I don't have to worry about what people are

thinking. Or to explain things that they don't understand. Like why I look so different. Like why we don't seem related at all. Like where do I come from. I wouldn't know what to tell them, so I just make sure that they won't have to ask.

Groans and cheers erupt beside me. A buzzer sounds and Lou and Stella begin dancing, doing victory laps around the couch. Mama and the others are somber. They swat at my cousins as though they are pesky flies.

'Hey – your team may have won, but don't be too smug about it,' Auntie Jo says, a smile on her lips.

'We'll take that as thanks for all this free food we've brought you,' Auntie Pat adds.

'To the victors go the spoils!' Louanna says.

Stella tries to say the same as she chews on a mouthful of shrimp crisps.

'Hmph. At least Olive has the decency to be sad about our team losing,' Mama chimes in, ruffling my hair.

'Is our team the one in red?' I ask her, and my cousins double over in laughter. Mama shakes her head.

'Sometimes, I wonder how you can be related to us,' Stella says. I know she means it as a joke, but her words sting anyway. I don't say anything back.

‘Hey – there’s a gash on my belly that proves it,’ says Mama. ‘And three very credible witnesses attesting to the fact that this wonderful girl came from inside me,’ she adds, gesturing at Lola and my aunts.

Mama crouches down beside me and cups my face in her hands. ‘Look at the sparkle behind those eyes. Look at those beautiful pearly whites. Smile for me baby,’ she says. I smile. She smiles beside me. ‘See? Any way you cut it – there’s no denying that this girl is my daughter,’ she says, planting a big kiss on my cheek.