

Red Clover

Florence Osmund

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1 | Special Doesn't Cut It

Eight-year-old Lee Winekoop entered the front parlor to find his mother sitting in her favorite Louis XV chair reading an issue of *Town & Country*. An identical chair occupied the space immediately next to it for his father. Without knowing why, Lee had never liked those chairs, nor the room they were in. The parlor—with its twelve-foot ornate ceiling and stilted furniture—made him feel tiny, unimportant, and uncomfortable. But then he didn't feel very comfortable anywhere in the eighteen-room lakefront mansion in the wealthiest section of Evanston, Illinois.

Her black hair was pulled back into a perfectly coiffed bun at the nape of her neck, and the cultured pearl necklace Lee's father had given her years ago lay flat upon her flawless ivory skin. She did not bother to look up from her magazine.

"Where's Kate?"

He ignored her question as to his nanny's whereabouts and did not allow the queasy feeling in his stomach to stop him from asking the question that had been on his mind for a long time.

"Why are Nelson and Bennett so much older than me?"

His mother sighed and momentarily lifted her gaze from the magazine. "Older than I, dear."

Why does she care about grammar when I'm trying to figure out something this important?

"Older than I, then. Why is that?"

"I don't know what you mean, Lee."

His stomach began to churn. "Nelson was born in 1950 and Bennett just two years after that. Then it was another eight years until I was born. They're so close to each other, and then there's me. Why is that?"

She looked past him, as if searching for the answer. After a long pause, she said, "It just happened that way. Not all children are spaced evenly apart." She made a face he knew all too well when she didn't want to deal with something. "Where is that woman?"

"They have dark hair, and mine is light."

"That happens in families."

"And I have green eyes."

"Your father—"

"No, Mother. Father has hazel eyes." Lee's heart was pounding. A child interrupting an adult while talking was forbidden in his family. "Did you want me when I was born?"

His mother's pursed lips and stone-faced stare told him he might have gone too far with that one. He hoped she would answer the question but was afraid at the same time.

Her face softened. "Of course I wanted you."

"Do you know what my initials spell?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Think about it, Mother. My name is Lee Oliver Winekoop. My initials spell L-O-W. Did you know that when you named me?"

She shifted her petite body in the chair and frowned. "What on earth has gotten into you? Maybe I need to make a special appointment with Dr. Jerry. Are you feeling all right?"

She was referring to Dr. Jerry Osgood, the psychologist Lee had been seeing for two years, to make him more like his brothers he thought. What his mother didn't know was how much he was already trying to be like them.

He almost laughed aloud at her question. When did he ever feel all right?

"Nelson's initials spell N-E-W."

"So?"

"And Bennett's are B-M-W. Mine spell out L-O-W. Why did you do that to me, Mother?"

"Lee, you're being overly sensitive. I'm sure...that is...I never gave any thought to what your initials would spell out when I named you. I wish you would stop being so querulous."

"Who was Nelson named after?" Lee knew the answer, but he wanted to hear her say it.

She shifted her gaze to something across the room and hesitated a moment before responding. "Uncle Nelson. Why do you ask?"

"Who was Bennett named after?"

She closed her eyes for a brief moment. "What difference does it make?"

"It was Grandfather, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said. She appeared as if she was about to sneeze. Lee waited for that to happen, and when it didn't, he asked the question that interested him the most.

"So who was I named after?"

She stared into Lee's eyes for several seconds before answering. "No one in particular, dear, I just fancied the name." The wistful look on her face wasn't one Lee had ever seen before.

"So you took the time to name them after someone special in the family, but when it came time to name me, you just picked some old name? And Lee is a girl's name anyway."

"Now you're being impertinent, young man. Did it occur to you that perhaps someone... Sometimes a family name can be... Where is Kate?" she asked, her face twitching with frustration.

Lee ignored her sensitivity to his questions and continued with his mission to get to the bottom of what had been bothering him for months. He shifted his weight.

"Do you know what happened on the day Nelson was born?" he asked.

"Yes, it was unbearably hot. I was nearly overcome by heat on the way to the hospital, and then I had to endure two hours of exasperating labor."

She doesn't get it.

"Do you know what else happened?"

She dabbed her brow with the monogrammed lace handkerchief she carried in her sleeve. "No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"There was a doctor right here in Chicago who did the first kidney transplant."

She took in a deep breath. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"And on the day Bennett was born, Mickey Mantle hit his first grand-slammer."

She crossed her arms across her chest. "That's nice, dear. What's a grand-slammer?"

"Guess what happened on the day I was born."

The little color she had in her face disappeared. "Please don't aggravate this occasion by making me guess, Lee. What difference do all these trivialities make?"

"On my birthday, *The Flintstones* was on television for the first time." He studied his mother's face for a reaction. "Don't you understand? That's the most important thing that happened on my birthday. That's all they could come up with for that day."

"That's all *who* could come up with?"

"Whoever puts together the list of important things that happen on each day. I checked it out at the library. It's all there in black and white."

"Lee, mothers have no control over what day their children are born. And I certainly did not have any knowledge of or influence over Mickey Mantle or *The Flankstones* or any other cultural phenomenon. What is your point?" Then she began to "shout," which for her meant speaking at a volume just above a whisper. "Kate! Where are you?"

A sudden whiff of her perfume made him feel faint. He backed away from her.

"It's *The Flintstones*, Mother. It's a silly cartoon show. It just seems kind of funny, that's all."

"Are you saying that if you were born one day sooner or one day later, it may have been advantageous for you in some way?"

"All I know is that if I had been born sooner, I wouldn't be so far behind."

"Behind what?"

"Nelson and Bennett."

"It's not a race, dear. And you shouldn't be comparing yourself to them—they are from...they're much...older and they'll..."

"And they'll what? Amount to something someday, but I won't?"

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"Father said it first, Mother."

"Lee, dear, you're special to us. You're not like Nelson or Bennett, and we don't expect you to be. And it's your own aspirations that will determine what you do in life."

He broke off eye contact with her and turned to walk away but then stopped and turned to face her again. "And then there's Uncle Nelson's birthday gifts. How do you explain *that*?" he asked before turning away from her.

"I'll call Dr. Jerry in the morning," she said to his back.

"If it makes you feel better, Mother," he mumbled.

Lee knew that Uncle Nelson had given Bennett ten thousand dollars' worth of blue-chip stocks on the day he was born, and to Nelson, his namesake, one hundred acres of land in Colorado. Lee had been given his uncle's coin collection. While Lee had never actually seen the coins—they had been placed in a bank safe-deposit box—and he didn't know how the three gifts compared in value, something told him he had gotten the short end of the stick.

Hands deeply implanted in his pockets, Lee shuffled back to his bedroom, shutting the door behind him and leaving all his unanswered questions to linger on the other side. Regardless of what “aspirations” were, special didn’t cut it.

His bedroom was large, professionally decorated, and furnished with everything a boy could want. But even ten times as many things wouldn’t have made Lee feel any better about himself. Despite his diligent preparation, this latest encounter with his mother had failed miserably, and he now realized he wasn’t likely to ever get straight answers from her.

He wished his brothers were a better source for finding things out, but while they had all grown up in the same family—same house, same everything—they were clearly different, and not just in age. He wished he knew what they had done differently, how he had missed the boat.

Mulling over where to get the answers to his burning questions, Lee realized he had never been in either of his brother’s bedrooms, and he was curious about what might be in there, what clues could be hiding inside. He opened his bedroom door a crack and poked his head through to see if the coast was clear. Nelson’s bedroom was at the opposite end of the hall from his, toward the back of the house. Family members with bedrooms at the back of the house, overlooking Lake Michigan, had the most status Lee noticed. Lee’s room was at the very front of the house, same status as the guest room, one more thing that bugged him.

He turned the doorknob and entered Nelson’s room. He had peeked in a few times before when his brother’s door was open, but because he’d had no business being in that section of the hallway, he hadn’t stopped to take much of it in.

Entering the room, he shut the door behind him. Nelson’s room was much bigger than his own. The furniture was bigger, and there was more of it. There was a bathroom and walk-in closet too. Lee inhaled deeply. Even the smell of the room was different, but he couldn’t put his finger on why.

Sitting down in Nelson’s rolling desk chair, he felt lost. He opened the middle drawer and shuffled through the pens, paper clips, loose change. There was a ticket stub for *West Side Story* at Lincoln Center, which Nelson had recently attended with his brother and mother in New York, and a sappy Valentine’s Day card from his girlfriend.

A Swiss Army knife caught his attention. He picked it up and pulled out one of the blades.

I wonder how old he was when he got this.

It looked old, and thinking Nelson wouldn’t miss it, he slipped the knife into his pocket.

Lee sifted through the rest of the desk drawers and not finding anything of interest, proceeded to Nelson’s dresser, where he found the same things he had in his own drawers—pretty much whatever the maid had put in there. He was beginning to think this was a waste of time, since Nelson had probably taken all the good stuff with him to college. While Lee didn’t know exactly what he was looking for, he figured any token of his brother’s past activities would give him a better understanding of him—a better understanding of how *he* should be.

He wandered into the closet, which was half the size of Lee’s entire bedroom, where he found another dresser way in the back. He went through each of the drawers—old textbooks, a chess game, a transistor radio.

Then he hit the jackpot.

Magazines. A trove of them. With pictures of nearly naked ladies on the covers. He took one out of the drawer, and with barely enough light coming in from the small window behind the dresser, flipped through the pages to the centerfold. He stared at it for a long moment, not breathing in a single molecule of air. He had no idea ladies looked like that underneath their clothes. Sitting down on the floor, he flipped through the other pages. When he saw the two naked women together, really close together, he quickly closed the magazine and put it on the floor, face down.

Wanting to take full advantage of the scant light coming through the window, Lee had to move two gym bags, several tennis rackets, and a suitcase in order to crawl into the tight space behind the dresser. He pulled everything back in place, sat under the window, and opened the magazine to page one.

* * *

Lee woke up to the sound of sirens. After he got his bearings, he stood up and looked out the window into the darkness of the side yard. Standing on his tiptoes and craning his neck, he could see through the window to the street. Police cars with their lights blazing were everywhere!

Anxious to see what all the commotion was about, he quickly dug his way out of his hiding place and raced for the door. But when he heard an unfamiliar man's voice coming from the hallway, he stopped short of opening it.

"I know you said you looked up here, Mrs. Winekoop," the man yelled, "but a second sweep won't hurt. Kids have an uncanny way of fitting into the darndest places."

Lee's chest tightened, and suddenly his skin felt like it was on fire. When his stomach started lurching, he knew an anxiety attack was about to erupt. Frozen in place, he stood in the middle of Nelson's room, shaking, until someone opened the door.

Lee didn't know who was more surprised—he or the policeman. He was big and tall, the biggest man Lee had ever seen, and he didn't look very friendly.

"What the..." He turned around and shouted, "I found him. He's in here."

Within seconds, his mother appeared in the doorway. "Oh, my. Where on earth have you been?"

"I don't feel so good," Lee said in a weak voice.

His mother walked over to him and took his hand. "Let's get you lying down." She looked at the policeman. "Will you please excuse me? I'll just be a minute."

Lee's mother led him to his bedroom, turned down the comforter on his bed, and told him to crawl in—shoes, clothes, and all. "Just lie here quietly while I take care of...things."

He lay there, afraid to move, for what seemed like a long time, until both his mother and father came into his room.

His father's voice was low but his tone harsh. "Where on earth were you—"

"Please, Henry, let me handle this."

"Just keep in mind, Abigale, that a few minutes ago, we had five police cars in front of our house and the makings of a search party getting ready to—"

"I know. I was there." She sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at Lee.
"Sweetheart, we couldn't find you anywhere. Where were you all this time?"

"What time is it?"

"It's almost eight o'clock. Where have you been? Were you in Nelson's room the whole time?"

Lee nodded.

Lee's father disappeared.

"We looked in there. Even under the bed, in the closet. Didn't you hear us?"

Lee shook his head. "I don't feel very good. I think I'm having an anxiety attack."

"Maybe you should rest then. I'll get—"

"This is what the little ingrate was up to," his father shrieked. He waved the magazine in the air. "Looking at smut! Eight goddamn years old, and he's looking at naked women! What the hell got into you, you sorry excuse for a—"

"Henry! Stop it. I said I'll handle this. It's—"

"It's my house! And the way this should be handled is with a good whooping. Sneaky little bas..."

Before his father could finish his sentence, his mother stood up, right in his face. "I said I will handle this, and I will. And it won't be by corporal punishment. Now, leave us alone, so I can talk privately with my son."

His father threw the magazine down and darted out the door.

"Where did you get the magazine, Lee?"

He didn't want to tattle on Nelson. "I just found it."

"You have to tell me the truth. You didn't just find it. Where did you get it?"

He didn't respond.

"From another boy?"

Lee remained silent.

"You're making this harder than it has to be." She paused. "If you don't tell me, I'm sure your father will get to the bottom of it. Now tell me where you got it."

"In Nelson's room."

"Don't lie to me. He would never have such a thing in his room."

"Okay. Don't believe me. I don't care. It wasn't what I was looking for in the first place. I just ran across it in a drawer. It was just there, so I looked at it. I think I must have fallen asleep 'cause when I woke up, I saw all the police cars out front."

"But we searched that room."

"There's a space in the closet, behind the brown dresser, by the window. I was back there."

"Good heavens. Do you have any idea how we worried when we couldn't find you?"

"No."

"We didn't know if you had run off, were kidnapped, or what."

"I'm sorry."

His mother heaved a sigh and turned toward the door. "Someone will be in to check on you a little later. Try to get some rest."

"Mother?"

"What is it?"

"Who's turn was it to watch me today?"

"Apparently there was a scheduling misunderstanding with Kate."

"Is she here now?"

"Kate is no longer with us. Your father took care of that."

Lee waited for the maid to check in on him before climbing out of bed and tiptoeing down the stairs to the second-floor landing. He positioned himself behind the tall potted plant where he knew he could hear what was going on in the front foyer without being seen. His parents' voices were low but audible.

"...and I'll say it again," his father was saying. "There's something wrong with that boy, and the sooner you take care of it, the better off we'll all be."

"And I've said it before, and I'll say it again," his mother responded. "It's not that easy. He hasn't been seeing Dr. Jerry for that long, and I think he's making headway. I just wish you'd be more—"

"The boy doesn't need some fancy shrink to see what's wrong with him. Send him off to Hampshire like I suggested a year ago. They specialize in kids like him. It's not that far from the New York apartment. You could stay there and be near him."

"First of all, it's more than two hundred miles from our apartment, and secondly, I am not sending him off to some boarding school. That's not the answer."

"Well, he doesn't fit in here, and if you'd like me to go into the reasons why, just let me know. And this last incident is just—"

"This may come as a shock to you, but that *Playboy* magazine came out of Nelson's room."

"I suppose he told you that. And, of course, you believed him."

"I believe him."

"Don't be so naive. He's lying, and that makes the whole situation worse. Now we can't trust him. Look, you're ultimately responsible for half of Evanston's police force on our doorstep looking for that kid. It's a good thing they don't charge for their services. Would you like me to calculate just how much that would cost?"

"You're all about money."

"You bet I am. And you can also bet our two sons will take after me."

Lee heard footsteps and got ready to flee.

"Do what you want. I don't care," his father said.

A door slammed.

Lee huddled behind the planter, ready to run to his room if he heard his mother coming up the stairs. Instead, he heard her crying.

He couldn't bear to hear her sobs and wanted to run to her and tell her everything would be all right. He forced back his own tears. He needed to be strong.

On the way back to his bedroom, Lee went to Nelson's room and slipped the Swiss Army knife into his brother's desk drawer. Back in his own bed, he replayed his parents' conversation in his head.

So many of the things his father had said disturbed him, but none had hurt as deeply as, "Do what you want. I don't care."