



What's in a name?

On names, naming, and name-calling

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"Give your daughters difficult names.
Names that command the full use of the tongue.
My name makes you want to tell me the truth.
My name does not allow me to trust anyone
who cannot pronounce it right."

— WARSAN SHIRE

"MAMA, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS GIVE OUT DADA'S
name at coffee shops?"

My son is clinging to my leg at Starbucks. He's asking me why, when cashiers invite me to offer a name when we're ordering a latte, or take-out, I always say, "Um, it's Bruce."

I used to stutter, spelling out my name: "M-I-N..." and then falter, switching to his name instead.

I don't think much of it now. I do it almost without thinking, and try to pay attention when Bruce's name is called, because I don't remember automatically.

I do it because I dread the way they will mispronounce my name.

I dread the way they take what seems like hours to scrawl my name down, yet inevitably get it wrong. I dread them calling me Michelle instead of Minelle. Every time I give out my husband's name, I hang my head in dog-like shame, but I still do it.



Names I have been called at different times in my life:

Minelley
Mini
Mini-Mouse
Smelly Minelley
Mahtaniman
Minellsey
Minoushka
Junam
Beti
Paki
Chink

This is, in fact, a shortened version of the list.

Grade six. The new girl, R., sports feathered blonde frosted hair, and shiny train-track braces. Her crooked teeth don't stop her from becoming the most popular girl in school. She singles me out for ridicule. In class, R. takes a small package of crystals meant for an experiment and, when Mr. Coleman isn't looking, surreptitiously and cleverly tips the small package into the back pocket of my brand new Jordache jeans. The entire class bursts into laughter. I don't tell anyone.

The next day, R. comes armed with a new weapon; this time, not chemical. It's a sheaf of a hundred mimeographed pages. A hand-written list titled "A hundred reasons why we all hate Minelle" in bubble letters. She distributes them all over the school.

I try not to remember the reasons listed but they remain on the edges of my memory, particularly when I am hating myself, even at the age of 49.

Some are ridiculous reasons, like #29: because she has a paper route. But reason #67? "She has a stupid name." That one, that one still stings.

At that moment I would have done anything to change the "n" in my name to "ch." Anything, anything to rid myself of my history, my connection to my ancestors, to remove the ways I was singled out for my difference.

When my parents divorce, I return to the comfort books I devoured when I was a young teen. My favourite: Gordon Korman's *I Want to Go Home*—the story of a boy who is shipped off to camp without his consent, and tries at every turn to escape.

I'm inspired by this character, and boldly tell my mother that I will no longer go by my name. From now on, I will only be referred to and will only respond to this character's name, Rudy. I solemnly tell strangers my name is Rudy. When they hear me utter this name, they look at me quizzically, then look at my mom's complexion. *Doesn't match.*

I only change my name back to Minelle after my one of my mother's potential suitors, a man with ghost-like pallor who looks like he'd be more at home on a used car lot rather than on our plastic-covered couch, hears my new name when he's introduced to me.

"Rudy?" He says, guffawing, spitting out some of the *gulab jamun* my mother has offered him.

"Rudy? Do you know what that means? Horny!"

He laughs hysterically, wiping the rose-water syrup from his mouth in one long, slow, swipe.

My mother shakes her head quickly at me, as if waking up for the first time. I, too, have never heard this before.

Of course, like the good Muslim girl I am, I decide to discard the name that moment. It won't be until more than 20 years later that I realize what the used car salesman meant.

He was confusing Rudy with Randy.

"Randy: a noun: to be aroused or excited."

I'm thirty-five years old. My white boyfriend and I are arguing about what we are going to name our future child. He likes names like George, James, John. I suggest Amina, if we have a girl. It's a name I have long loved, an Iranian name popular in my family.

My boyfriend looks at me askance. Tilts his head and then shakes it, no.

"Amina? What kind of name is that?"

Immediately I feel my body tense up. I straighten up and say, "It's part of my family's tradition."

He rolls his eyes and says, "No way. Imagine how a kid with that name would be teased in the schoolyard. There would be no end to it. No kid of mine will be named Amina."

Not surprisingly, the relationship does not last. It was never meant to, and this was but one of the many signs.

Later, when I marry my husband, this former boyfriend calls me. He wishes me well and says he's happy for me. I believe him. There is no animosity in his voice. He says, "I see what you named your son. You gave him a white name. I thought you said you'd never do that?"

It is a colonial question that doesn't deserve an anti-colonial answer.

My husband and I are discussing names for our child. I think about my dissertation research, on women of mixed race. For that project, I interviewed many women who had changed their names late in life to reflect their mixed race identities more fully. They moved from names like Lisa, Laurie, Sarah, and Mary to names like Aliyeh, Zara, Nyla. I am ready to make a pronounced case for a non-white name with my partner, ready for battle. My child—we now know it will be a boy—will have an Indian or Iranian name.

I am stubborn with Bruce, citing the research, explaining how important names are to a mixed child. We start combing through lists of names.

Nothing resonates for either of us. We try Reza, Hasan, Amir. Say the names out loud. I roll them around in my mouth, like pebbles washed up on the beach shore.

My friend in Hong Kong suggests Ash, short for Ashok—which means without sorrow. I think about how it sounds like Ashraf. A version of that ends up becoming his middle name, but not his first, taking shape as Asher, because I read about the

name in Lois Lowry's book, *The Giver*. It means "happy" and it is what I long for my child to be.

When my son arrives on a blustery wintry day at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, with my mom and my best friend by my side (my husband is still in Vancouver, having been called when I went into labour, but not making it in time for the actual birth). I look at my child's scrawny, wet face, and I am immediately jarred by how white his skin is. I don't know why I expected to have a child who is darker—my skin is still so light—but I thought I would see more of my Dad in his face.

We don't name our child for two weeks.

Between nights of sleeplessness, the experience of colic, and the usual challenges of having a baby around, we simply can't get our act together to name him. I think about how adamant I was before the baby's arrival about providing my child an Indian and Iranian first name. But I see now that passing on a specific part of my family legacy matters to me—not just a vague gesture to my heritage. My father's last name matters. Mahtani. I want him to have my father's last name.

For some reason, I imagine him hanging out with other boys on the soccer field who will only call him by his last name, as boys tend to do sometimes, not his first. I can see it: the soccer ball, heading for the goal post. My son, stopping it, sharply. A team member shouts out: "Way to go, Mahtani! Nice block!"

I awake from my revelry. Yes, that's it. Mahtani. I no longer care about the first name, only the last.

My husband acquiesces, easily. I thought there would be more of a struggle.

Hello Dr. Minelle Mahtani,
This might seem odd and I hope that you will understand and answer my question.

My name is X, and I live in Stockholm, Sweden. My wife and I are having our second daughter in February, and we are thinking about giving her the name Minelle. We find it to be very beautiful. My parents are from Iran and my wife's from Bangladesh, although her father is from India. I found you by searching the internet for the meaning and origin of the name Minelle, and it is very hard to get a clear understanding of either. According to a few internet sites the name means "my little girl" or "my sunshine" in French, which gives me reason to believe that the origin is French. Since you live in Canada, do you know if this is correct? My wife and I would be very grateful if you could enlighten us with whatever you know about your first name.

I stare at the email, and write back:

My parents moved to Toronto from London in the 1960s, just before the policy of Canadian multiculturalism was implemented. They had experienced racism in England, and wanted to try to live someplace new where they thought they could have a fresh start. They wanted

their first child to have a name that integrated their joy about welcoming a daughter into the world with their commitments to racial and religious harmony, given that my Father was raised Hindu, and my Mother was Muslim. They asked friends for their suggestions.

One of their friends suggested Manal, because they said it roughly translates into *wish come true* in Arabic. My parents said they looked at each other and knew right away they had found their name. They always told me growing up that I was their wish come true. This meant a lot to me—it made me feel that I had a legacy that bore back to my parents' deep love for me, and it has given me strength, determination and a strong sense of purpose over the course of my life. I have met other "Manals"—with variations on the spelling. My name is spelled "Minelle" as you know. My parents knew that they were living in a country that was distinguished by bilingualism—French is one of the official languages of Canada. They also were concerned about the pronunciation of the name—they wanted to make sure others could say it. They thought about the name "Michelle"—which has French derivations. So, they altered the spelling somewhat—and Minelle was born, which gestures towards French-Canadian culture. I find it is easy for people to spell and to pronounce (most of the time!). I can easily say, "My name is Minelle - Min - E - double L - E." I say to people, "It's like Michelle—but with an N" and that also helps, too. I have loved that over the years people tend to exclaim, "Oh what a beautiful name!" And I feel very proud to say, "It is Arabic." Because I look slightly—dare I say—racially ambiguous, by proclaiming the derivation of the name, I am gesturing to my background as a non-white person even though I am not Arab. It also provides a way to build bridges with others, and it has led to some beautiful conversations with inquisitive and kind souls over the years.

I hope this helps a bit! I am so thrilled you are contemplating this name."

A few months later, I get a response back:

Thank you so much for your beautiful words about your name. Here is a pic of my two wonderful princesses Minelle and N...!"

The photo is of two children: a little girl, with dark hair and dark eyes, embracing a baby. The baby has an expression that can only be described as blissful in sleep, her little hands balled up in fists.

I hope she has the strength within those little hands to fight for her name, in the way I have not.