

My Name Could Be Toby Gardner

by Ann S. Epstein

I lost my name. Perhaps the name was never mine to begin with. In which case, will I ever own one? Or, if the name was once in my possession, can I get it back?

People on intimate terms with their names stir envy in me. When I hear mine, no inner voice says “Me”. The roots of this dissociation sprout in a family soil that teems with multiple, secret, and lost names. Such history is common among immigrants who changed their names to assimilate. For me, not being my name also stems from my family’s particular pathology.

My late mother, for example, Kate Alsofrom Savishinsky, could be called Gussie Shirley Savage. Like many Eastern Europeans who came to the United States at the turn of the last century, names on both sides of my family were Anglicized or phoneticized. Thus, my father’s Polish surname “Czauczinski” became “Savishinsky” at Ellis Island. When my mother married him, she shortened it to “Savage” at work, which was also the name we put on the waiting list at the Chinese restaurant where, like other New York Jews, we often ate supper on Sunday nights.

The story behind “Gussie” is explained in this letter I submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with my mother’s Medicaid application:

The enclosed 1911 birth certificate erroneously lists my mother’s first name as Gussie rather than Kate. Her aunt, who was interviewed at the lying-in hospital, had limited English, and thought the official was asking for *her* name (which was Gussie) instead of the baby’s name. My mother’s Austrian maiden name, spelled “Alzufrumm” on her birth certificate, was later Anglicized to “Alsofrom”. I am also faxing a copy of *my* 1946 birth certificate, which lists my mother’s name correctly as Kate Savishinsky and her birthplace as the United States. I trust that with both

documents, her citizenship will be established for Medicaid purposes.

“Shirley” was yet another twist in the Medicaid application, which also required a copy of my mother’s Social Security card. I found one issued in her work name, Kate Savage, but needed a card under her legal name, Kate Savishinsky. She’d owned one when I’d moved her into assisted living a few years earlier, but had soon lost it, along with her purse, and her mind.

Since my mother was a packrat, I asked my brother Steve (whose first name is Joel, but Joel is what we called an older cousin) to check for a Social Security card in the possessions he’d stored when we cleaned out her apartment. He discovered a card, but it identified her as Kate Shirley Savage. We’d never heard the name “Shirley” and assumed it was an error. But after phoning my mother’s sister Fae (called Fannie or Feigele as a child), I emailed my brother:

Dear JSS: [Note: He and I avoid the first-name problem by using our initials]
Shirley (surely) you won’t believe this. Mom’s real middle name *is* Shirley! When I shared my tale of woe with Aunt Fae, we had the following conversation:

Me: I know Mom used “Savage” in business, but who knows where “Shirley” comes from.

Fae: Shirley is your mother’s middle name.

Me: I thought it was Sheba, from her Jewish name, Kayla Shayva.

Fae: No, it’s Shirley, although she’d call me a liar for saying so. She wanted it to be Sheba.

Me: Huh? Mom hated that name on account of the Shirley Booth movie “Come Back Little Sheba.” Sheba was a runaway dog.

Fae: No, your mother always liked the name Sheba.

Me: Did my father know my mother’s real middle name was Shirley?

Fae: I have no idea what your father knew about your mother.

Love,
ASE

As my maternal grandmother Mindel (who was registered as Minnie at Ellis Island) used to say, “I’m glad I didn’t die yesterday or I wouldn’t have known that.” I was fifty-nine when I discovered my mother’s real middle name. She was too far gone by then for me to ask her why she claimed it was “Sheba,” but even if she’d been cogent, I doubt she would have told me the truth. In her typical long-winded fashion, she would have narrated a convoluted story in which she was the aggrieved party or the heroine. And, as my straight-talking Aunt Fae said, my mother would have called her sister a liar.

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If learning my mother’s identity meant sorting truth from fiction in her nonstop chatter, figuring out my father’s entailed filling in gaps of silence. He was not just taciturn, like many men of his generation. When I was a graduate student in psychology, I recognized in him the classic symptoms of a schizoid personality, someone incapable of relating to others. As a child, however, I knew only that his muteness made me ashamed to invite friends to our apartment.

Despite his lack of connection to others, or perhaps because he lived inside himself, my father seems to have had a strong sense of who he was. Except for passively allowing my mother to use Savage at the office and Jade Garden, he refused to simplify his last name. On the other hand, in elementary school, he’d dropped his first name in favor of his middle one. He stuck with this choice, even when it was later ignored by virtually everyone, who called him by a nickname. My father was born Layzeh Dovid in the shtetl of Yadow, and called Louis David when he arrived in America as a boy. For untold reasons, he hated the name Louis and answered only to David. In his teens, friends nicknamed him “Cal” after President Calvin Coolidge, a man stingy with words, who the press had dubbed “Silent Cal.” The president’s reticence may have been a political choice. No one was aware, or admitted, that my father’s was a handicap.

As young adults, my parents met at a summer resort on the Jersey shore, where

they'd each rented cabins with their friends. Urged by her bunkmate to check out a guy named Cal, my mother approached the man she hoped would be him, but was told by that man, "I'm not Cal. He's the bum over there." Redirected, she paired off with the guy who was Cal for the summer. Back in the Bronx that fall, my father phoned her to resume their courtship:

He: Hello, this is David.

She: David who?

He (annoyed): You know, David.

She: I don't know anyone named David.

He: We've been dating for two months!

She: You mean Cal?

Friends and family never called my father anything but Cal after the nickname was bestowed in the 1920s. Yet he steadfastly thought of himself as David until his death in 1997. What they intended as a playful moniker was to him a painful reminder of his isolation. I never heard my father protest—he was incapable of direct confrontation—but "David" was how he always introduced himself and the name he signed on his anniversary cards to my mother.

My father was equally reticent about his own parents. He never spoke of his father, who died when I was a toddler. The story as reported by my mother—or invented by her; one could never be sure, especially about tales that cast my father's family in a bad light — is that her father-in-law was an alcoholic who disappeared for long stretches of time when my father was growing up. As the oldest child, my father was pressured by



*Gussie, Cal, Steve, and Toby
a.k.a. Kate, David, Joel, and Ann*

his demanding mother to become “the man of the house,” a worldly role for which he was ill-suited, and his shame and bitterness muted him for life. So total was his silence that my brother and I did not know our paternal grandfather’s name until we were in our 40s. We were gathered for the bar mitzvah of my brother’s younger son, Jacob, when my brother and I asked our father the name of his father. His reply: “Jacob. I assumed my grandson was named for him.” I don’t know which of us was more surprised at the other’s not knowing.

The true name of our father’s mother was revealed even later, ten years after our father’s death. My brother, cousins, and I had called her Grandma Lillie, which we assumed was short for Lillian. But on my 61st birthday, my father’s sister told me that their mother was born Ruchel (Rachel) Leah. She reinvented herself in America, dropping her first name and applying the initial of the second to one that may have sounded less Jewish or more elevated than her peasant upbringing. My aunt, and the rest of my father’s family, assumed that my daughter, Rebecca, was named for her, this time repurposing the “R.” I informed my aunt otherwise, but perhaps I should have let the misconception survive. A lineage buried in silence deserves to create its own stories.

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My full name is Ann Toby Savishinsky Epstein. When I married my first husband, few women kept their maiden names. Since I was not enamored of mine, and was years shy of understanding and loving my father, I took my spouse’s last name, which was Epstein. To preserve part of my identity, however, I began using Savishinsky as a middle name. Eight years later, when he and I divorced, I kept Epstein to maintain continuity for my young daughter and because I’d published under that name. I still sometimes think of myself as a Savishinsky, though. Whenever a group is split alphabetically into A-M and N-Z, my instinct is to head for the one that includes “S.”

Twenty-five years later, when I remarried, I continued to use Epstein. My daughter was grown, and my career was well established by then, as was the practice of women not changing their names. However, my second marriage raised the possibility of yet another name for me.

I was called by my middle name, Toby, until kindergarten, when I insisted on using my first name, Ann. I happily shed Toby because it was an easy mark for alliterative teasing. I was called “Toothless Toby” after a fall knocked out my baby teeth years before the permanent ones grew in. “Tubby Toby” didn’t fit the skinny kid I was, but amused my tormenters. Toby could also be a boy’s name (*Toby Tyler and the Circus* was a popular children’s book at the time). The final humiliation was a television show about an elephant named Toby. When I switched to Ann, teasing rhymes like “Ann, Ann, frying pan” sounded too impersonal to bother me. Perhaps it was also an early indication that I didn’t think of the name “Ann” as really belonging to me.

Despite my becoming Ann at school, to my family I remained Toby. So, when I married my second husband forty-five years later, my Aunt Honey, whose real name is Anita, sent us a check made out to “Gerald and Toby Gardner.” Our joint account was under Gerald Gardner and Ann Epstein. He endorsed the check and I went to the bank to explain the situation to the teller:

Me: My aunt thinks I took my new husband’s last name, which is “Gardner.” (As further proof that I wasn’t faking a family relationship, I pointed out that the middle name on my driver’s license, Savishinsky, was also my aunt’s last name.)

Teller: No problem, I understand. (Long pause ...) Who’s Toby?

The teller’s perplexity mirrors mine. None of my names: Ann or Toby, Savishinsky or Epstein, feels like me.

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Funny as name anecdotes can be, it is also tragic when ancestral names are lost. But in addition to this universal phenomenon, my personal disconnection is the legacy of my odd family history. I question whether I am alone in having a nameless self, or if others share my experience. Even people who dislike their names don’t necessarily question that they belong to them. And what of those who are adopted or assume a different name for fame, fortune, or fraud? Did Norma Jean think of herself as Marilyn? Did James Gatz fully inhabit the person of Jay Gatsby? Did Anna Anderson

believe herself to be Princess Anastasia? Or did they coexist with a stranger who posed as them?

Now in my mid-seventies (and single again), I occasionally braid my hair in the style I wore as a little girl. I wonder if I am not just attempting to recapture my youth but to become Toby again. Up until age five, I had only one name. I may have been haunted by an unhappiness I was too young to name—my father’s silence, my mother’s lies—but I knew who I was. Rejecting that name may have been a child’s way of rejecting that family. Decades later, with more wisdom and empathy, perhaps I am ready to reclaim as mine the family that made me.

One solution to my self-alienation is to think of myself as the name I like best. Each has something to recommend it. Toby is uncommon and cute. I value creativity and I’m small, so the name fits. Ann, Hebrew for grace, is reassuring in the face of aging and death. My signature initials also appeal. ASE is the suffix for enzyme or catalyst, and I like to see myself as an agent of change. Yet, there’s no satisfying click when I drop any of these names into the slot labeled “me.” I’m still unwilling to give up the hope that someday I will find, and know, my name, but I fear it is too late. Either our names become us when we are young or they are forever lost.



Ann S. Epstein writes novels, short stories, memoir, craft articles, and book reviews. Her awards include a Pushcart Prize nomination for creative nonfiction, the Walter Sullivan prize in fiction, and an Editors’ Choice selection by *Historical Novel Review*. Her novels are *On the Shore*, *Tazia and Gemma*, and *A Brain. A Heart. The Nerve*. Her stories and nonfiction work appear in *Sewanee Review*, *PRISM International*, *Ascent*, *The Long Story*, *Saranac Review*, *The Madison Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Passages North*, *Summerset Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *William and Mary Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and many other literary journals. In addition to writing, she has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and a M.F.A. in textiles. Her stories often have historical settings that mix fact and fiction. Her nonfiction explores the people, places, and events that shape us, especially the residue left by family and friends. Her website is: <https://www.asewovenwords.com>.