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Let Us Now Praise Famous Names

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“You can choose the name,” she texted.

“No—Really?” I texted back, incredulous that this woman, an old school chum and a poet, would charge me with naming her third child. Poets do love to name things.

I, neither poet nor parent, have only ever named mongrels. I used to foster death-row dogs from a local shelter—*shelter* being that soothing euphemism for extermination camp, because we need to be soothed, don’t we, when it comes to dogs, and that’s why they don’t die. They’re not put to death. They’re put to *sleep*. So whenever I got “the call” (the foster group’s version of a governor’s pardon), I would cart home the tired, the poor, the huddled masses of mangy fur. I would bathe the dogs, love them, socialize them. Finally, I would name them. I always chose Irish names. I don’t know why. I’m not Irish and none of the dogs were Irish breeds. Nor did they sing sea-shanties. But they’d had hard lives. They were scrappy. They were survivors, often found rooting through dumpsters or wandering the streets, eating rocks to feel full. Maybe I was thinking of the potato famine.

Anyway, it worked. My Irish-branded mutts were adopted in record speed. Oona, Fergus, Seamus, Aengus, Dooley, and Finn all found homes in a matter of weeks. Perhaps there is a correlation between Irish names and sympathy-response that says something about mythmaking and American ideology (and I am not prepared to formalize a theory without conducting further experiments with death-bound dogs using Mongolian, Aztec, and Viking names), but I will say that all the new owners *kept* the Irish names and sent photo-Christmas cards (often with locks of fur enclosed, which is weird, I’ll grant you). And for some reason, the dogs in the photos are wearing shamrock sweaters and grinning idiotically.

So my old friend may have been thinking about dogs and locks of hair and little idiots when she asked me to name her child. Or maybe it’s true what they say about the third child: the trivial things matter less. You’ve kept two children alive at this point. The third is a coaster. If so, I could name the kid Paint and no one would blink.

Here’s the catch. This woman belongs to a peculiar caste of Gen-X-ers in their thirties and forties who have begun (at an alarming rate) to name their offspring after dead authors. The babies of these people are called Ezra or Eliot; Fitzgerald, Flannery or Faulkner. There’s Bronte and Beckett, Chandler and Carver. And let’s not forget the Russians (they haven’t). I’ve been to the birthday parties of a young Anton, a Leo, and a Fyodor. Yes, *Fyodor* (whose parents are California WASPS). I’m confident that a birth announcement for baby Ishmael or Bartleby is forthcoming, because when parents find that all the good authors are taken, they turn to the names of troubled literary characters.

Fun fact: Cate Blanchett named her third child Ignatius. The actress claims she ran out of steam after naming her first two kids—Dashiell (after Hammett) and Roman (after Polanski). Proof of my hypothesis, I thought, but she clarified the record. She found Ignatius (that famed ne’er do well of *A Confederacy of Dunces*) in a children’s book called *Captain Underpants*. To her credit, she is not a poet. And it was, after all, her third child.

I’ve been informed that my friend’s third child will be a girl. And (in this age of increasing gender-fluidity) I wondered if I ought to choose a name that is less likely to result in identity-oppression. Andy or Parker, perhaps. Or should I follow the blazed path of celebrity babies with neutral, organic names like Lake or River, Apple or Rainn or Leaf (but

of course, Leaf Phoenix changed his name to Joaquin, so clearly his parents didn't do him any favors).

Go for *Seinfeld*, I'm thinking. No, *Seinfeld* is a terrible name for a child. I'm talking about the episode from 1996, where the gang discusses baby names. George Costanza (master of such monikers as Art Vandelay and Buck Naked) says he's got a secret baby name he's been hanging onto, just in case. *A real original*, he says. *Seven. A beautiful name for a boy or girl. Mickey Mantle's number.* George defies Jerry to think of a better name and, looking around the kitchen, Jerry immediately counters with Mug. *Mug Constanza. Or Ketchup*, he offers, *Pretty name for a girl...How 'bout Bisquick? Pimento? Gherkin?*

Another fun fact: Victoria Beckham (formerly "Posh Spice") and her footballer husband, David, gave birth to their fourth child. They named the girl Harper, and given my theory of extra children, we may assume the child is *not* named after the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Indeed, the couple claims she was named for a character in a Disney show. Added bonus: the child's middle name is the same as Mr. Beckham's famous jersey number... *Seven*.

So, given that the world is now a giant club for weirdly named children, it should be no surprise that I entered absurdist territory, especially when my friend texted: "How about a flower? Rose? Lily? Daisy?" Her two boys are Tolstoy and Proust, so I snapped: "Why name the third child after a flower just because you're tired and she's got two x chromosomes? Do you want people to say of her *Oh, how like a FLOWER she is? How lovely to sniff her before she loses her bloom and rots on the stem?* She deserves a name that suggests profound potential!" And, thinking of *Seinfeld*, I came up with THE. PERFECT. NAME. Ready? Get excited.

H2O. Because it doesn't get more significant than water, right? The planet is primarily water. The human body is primarily water. Without WATER, we cease to exist. I mean, sure, we need oxygen, too, but hydrogen molecules give it more oomph, don't you think? And scientific names are cool. *Maybe she'll grow up to be a scientist*, I thought. *We need more female scientists. The world needs this name!* I was giddy with self-congratulation. I wondered if it was too late to change my own name. My friend stopped texting long enough to appear to be considering it.

Me: So we're done, here? H2O? Because, I mean, I looooooove it.

Her: My oldest thinks it's a great name.

Me: Excellent. I always liked him.

Her: But he used to eat paste, so keep the names coming.

So H2O was out, *just* because Tolstoy ate a little paste! Keep this in mind, parents, when your kids get hungry during arts and crafts. Every genius idea they agree with afterwards will be immediately discounted because of their early fetish. It's just not fair. A week later...

Me: Andromeda! After the galaxy!

Her: You mean the book by Michael Crichton. About a deadly virus. No.

Me: She should be named after a planet, at the very least. But maybe not Uranus.

Her: Maybe not.

Me: On the other hand, a difficult name builds character. Don't you want her to be tough?

Her: Not that tough.

Me: So not Eva Braun.

Her: No, not Eva Braun.

And on and on, through the weeks. I suggested to my friend that she could wait until the child is old enough to choose her own name. Like when she's twenty or so.

Me: Just give her a placeholder name. Like Blank. Or TBD.

Her: I'm not calling the baby BLANK. If you're not good, I'll name her after you.

And maybe this is the real problem. Neither of us like our *own* literary names. My friend is named for a biblical character who suffers perpetually. Coincidentally (or not), my friend

has suffered a great deal in her life. I'm named for a character in a Waugh novel; a gullible, love-addled girl who commits suicide because someone *suggests* it. People are always hiding pills and knives from me.

I *like* the idea of waiting, I've decided. I suggest a three-to-five year mandatory waiting period for naming children (because naming a child should take longer than buying a gun). Why doom a baby with a used (soiled) name that they might grow into (and do you *want* your kid's life to resemble Fitzgerald's?) when you could capitalize upon your child's particular brand of neurosis? Think of the youthful peccadilloes that could provide both entertaining names and promising career paths: Sticks Things In Sockets. *Have you met my friend Sticks Things In? He's a gynecologist, now.* And then there's Flushes Weird Stuff. *Flushes is the civil engineer who made it possible to flush entire Russian novels without clogging city pipes.* Wears Cape Everywhere. *Cape is the head of a fashion house. And a superhero. And a Truman Capote impersonator.* And you've met my dear friends, Poops In Front Yard, Sings Christmas Carols While Pooping, and Refuses to Poop, Ever? Okay, *yes*. Names that arise during a child's formative years will often relate to poop. And *yes*, you'll know at least three kids called Eats Paste. But isn't that better than knowing three kids called Cheever?