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What's in a Name

Karen Moros

Jenny Harrington felt as if she were about to explode with the force of a small atomic bomb. She couldn't believe that she had once been a petite 110 pounds. Nine months of pregnancy had given her thirty more, and she could feel every one of them weighing her down as she moved millimeters at a time on her dining room chair. Her husband Keith was in the kitchen around the corner of the wall that her chair was leaning against. She and Keith had thought of breaking down the wall to unite the kitchen and the dining room and make the house look bigger. But when Jenny became pregnant, it didn't seem like a good idea anymore. Instead, they had painted it a bright lemon yellow that matched the apple green of the rest of the dining room.

"Yeah, Mom," she heard Keith say. "She's all right. She can hardly move, but she's all right."

Jenny scoffed. "Out of all the understatement I've heard in the past nine months, that one has to be the biggest," she said, raising her voice so he would be sure to hear her.

She heard him chuckle. "Yes, Mom, I'll call you and Dad when we're at the hospital . . . Okay . . . I love you too . . . Say hi to Dad for me."

"Tell her I send my love!" Jenny said, again raising her voice.

"Jenny sends her love," Keith reported. She heard a plate being set on the kitchen counter and smelled cinnamon. "Bye."

Jenny straightened in her chair in anticipation as Keith came around the corner and placed a bright red plate before her. It was the only plate of the set of eight that was chipped on its edge, a memory of Jenny's first dizzy spell when she had almost collapsed against the wall with the plate in her hand. Keith had caught her but not the plate, and it hit the corner of the wall, leaving a red mark that had since been covered with the yellow paint. He never understood why she had held on to the plate but had let herself go. Jenny's only answer was that she felt she needed to hold on to something.

"Two delicious square-shaped blueberry and blackberry waffles and a ton of raspberry syrup," Keith announced proudly, as if he had won a cooking competition. When Jenny became pregnant, Keith had

started doing as much cooking for her as he could. He would ask the doctor what it was that pregnant women needed to eat, then go home and muster all his creativity into one meal. The aromas of his first few culinary attempts had made Jenny throw up, but he had persevered and had even bought a cook book. As she became less sensitive, he became a better cook, and now, homemade waffles were his specialty.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Jenny said, stroking his cheek and laughing at the cheesiness of his announcement. She pointed at him, mocking sternness. “You know, you’re still making these after I give birth.”

Keith smiled and cocked his head as a line of white shine from the lamp above whipped across his black hair. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He sat at an angle from her at the head of the table.

As he put his elbows on the table, Jenny closed her eyes and took her first bite. Blue and black fireworks of juice exploded from the berries but were subdued by the warm, soft waffle. With her second bite, the syrup overpowered the other tastes, injecting its sweetness into her taste buds and making her crave more of it.

“She was asking if we had decided yet,” Keith said, interrupting Jenny’s reverie.

She opened her eyes. “Decided what?”

“Oh, just about everything that we haven’t decided yet,” Keith said with false casualness. “What we’re going to name him. If he’s going to be Catholic like me or Jewish like you. You know, the now infamous questions that we just had to wait until the last minute to answer.”

Jenny whimpered—half from the pleasure of tasting the waffles and half from frustration. “Oh, Keith, we’ve been so busy,” she said with her mouth full.

Keith nodded. “Yeah, what with starting up the catering business and emptying out that room for the baby and turning the den into an office.”

“All our friends coming over and buying all that baby stuff for us,” Jenny added, joining him in justifying their actions.

“And with your mom staying here to help out.”

“Mmhm,” Jenny mumbled, nodding. Then she shook her head despondently. “But you know, there really is no excuse, Keith. We’ve just put it off for no good reason.” She scoffed. “It’s shameful to think

that we haven't done our first duty as new parents."

Keith raised a finger. "That may be true, but we do have one credible excuse. At the beginning, you were way too hormonal to talk about anything."

Jenny dropped her head and chuckled with him at the memories of her first few months of pregnancy when she felt terrible all the time, even while she slept. "Yeah, that's true," she said, bringing her head back up and combing her light brown hair back into place. Keith laughed harder at her admission. "Who would've said we'd be laughing about those days now?"

He shook his head. "Not me. You'd never had mood swings like that. I think all of St. Louis heard your yelling." Jenny laughed harder and took another satisfying bite of her waffles.

"But seriously, Jenny," Keith said, crossing his arms and propping his chair on the two back legs. "It's almost time." He raised his eyebrows at her. "And we still haven't decided."

"Well, I said that the name could be your decision. If you haven't come up with one, then I'm not to blame."

His eyebrows went down suddenly, the way they did when he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Jenny, every time I come up with one, you don't like it."

"Well, maybe if we flip a coin or something like that. I don't know."

"Jenny," he groaned. His sigh was heavy with the frustration of her answer. "You know, if we were having twins this would be easier."

"What do you mean?" She bit into a blueberry.

"In that old TV show, *Little House on the Prairie* there was this girl—the mean one. I forgot her name. Anyway, she married a Jew. Both their parents were arguing about whether the child should be raised as a Christian or as a Jew, and they decided that if it was a girl, she'd be a Christian and if it was a boy, he'd be Jewish."

"And it all worked out because she had twins? One boy and one girl?"

Keith nodded. "Benny and Jenny."

"But, sweetheart, we're only going to have one boy, and I'm still not sure I want to raise him with both our religions and—" She took another bite, tasting more raspberry this time. "I just don't know, Keith."

"I think you two should come up with a name first," Jenny's

mother Geraldine exclaimed, stepping out of the den where she had been sleeping for the past two months. “Jew. Gentile. Circumcision. Baptism. You have time to decide all that. Right now what that baby needs is a name!” She nodded forcefully, making her white, wiry hair bounce against her small shoulders.

Jenny sighed as Geraldine sat across from her. “Yes, Mom, a name.” She felt the weight of the decision as she rolled her eyes. “At this point, I think I’d pay someone to come up with the right one.”

“I have one, honey,” Keith said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table again. “Nathaniel Conrad Harrington.”

Jenny’s face twisted. “I don’t like Conrad, and we’re just going to end up calling him Nathan or Nate. Why give him a long name that he’s never going to use? Look what happened to me. My name’s Jennifer, but I’ve always been Jenny.”

Keith cocked his head. “Okay, you’re right about Nathaniel, but Conrad was my grandfather’s name, and I’ve always liked it.”

“Well, my grandfather’s name was Carl, and I’ve always liked that name, but you don’t like it.” She took the last bite of the last waffle.

“How about Luke?” Geraldine suggested with a wrinkled smile.

“Too common,” Jenny answered. “But the length is good.” She pointed approvingly at Geraldine. “I’d like a short name since Harrington is a pretty long last name.”

Keith shook his head and took Jenny’s plate as he got up. “Besides, Luke was the name of the kid that used to bully me in third grade. I don’t like that name.” He disappeared behind the corner.

“Then how about a nice sensible name like John,” Geraldine said. “Many great men were named John.”

Jenny shook her head. “Many weirdoes were named John too, Mom. Besides, it’s plain boring.”

“Blaine,” Keith shouted from the kitchen.

Jenny tilted her head as she considered it. “That one’s . . . interesting I guess.”

Geraldine frowned, accentuating the wrinkles on her forehead, which were as deep as her life of seventy-five years was long. “It’s strange. It sounds like a brand of—” Keith came back into the dining room. “Breath mints.”

“Breath mints?” Jenny and Keith questioned simultaneously in surprise as their eyebrows came down quizzically.

Keith shrugged as he sat down at the head of the table again. “I heard it once and thought it sounded classical.”

Jenny shook her head vigorously. “No, we live in the year 2010. It has to be modern, not classical. But not too modern, I guess. And not bizarre like some kind of alien name.”

“As if we would ever do that, Jenny,” Keith said. “I’ve only given you names you consider boring. Far stretches from any alien names.”

“Yeah, but you’ve heard some of the other names people have suggested. They sounded like nicknames for E.T..”

“Or maybe they were just alien-like to you,” Geraldine said dryly.

Keith chuckled. “Someone suggested Hamilton Harrington. That was pretty funny.”

Jenny laughed. “And weird. The perfect name for this baby has to be somewhere between Gabriel and Ethan, but not Gabriel or Ethan and definitely not Kevin or Paul or John or anything remotely close to those names. And not Jacob like I’ve heard four million times in the past nine months.”

Keith groaned and rubbed his face. “We haven’t even started to think of a middle name.”

“Oh, Jenny, why are you so picky?” Geraldine exclaimed with all the disapproval of a mother who can’t reason with her daughter. “What’s in a name after all?”

Jenny rolled her eyes in exasperation. “If I hear that one more time,” she said, dropping her elbow forcefully onto the table as she pressed her forehead against her clenched fist. “A lot is in a name, Mom. It can’t just be anything. It somehow has to represent Keith and me and our faiths. It has to contain all the things that make up this household. Plus, it has to have a good meaning. Not one like ‘dweller at the court’ or something silly like that. It has to be—Ah!” Her face contorted and her hands shot to her stomach.

Geraldine jumped up, and Keith bounded out of his chair, knocking it to the floor as he reached for Jenny.

He touched her shoulders with more gentleness than his urgency demanded. “Jenny! What happened?” he asked, even as he became fully conscious of what was going on.

Jenny inhaled deeply and touched his hand on her shoulder. She couldn’t describe the relief she had just felt. The small atomic bomb had gone off and released a liberating aftershock that made her body

feel loose and tight at the same time.

“I’ll get the suitcase,” Geraldine said with a shaky voice as she ran to the den.

“Honey, talk to me!” Keith half-yelled desperately.

Jenny squeezed his hand and looked at him, her joy shining through her eyes as she smiled victoriously. “My water broke!” she exclaimed breathlessly as she started to feel the pain. “Whatever his name is, and whatever he believes, he’s not waiting anymore!”

Keith squeezed her shoulders. “Honey, listen to me. We can’t let our son come into this world without a name. Think of one. Quick!”

Jenny groaned loudly and started to sweat. Then the answer came instantly, yet so naturally that she hated herself for not having thought of it before.

“Isaiah,” she said in a whisper as she exhaled hard through her teeth.

He smiled. “Isaiah Conrad,” he said firmly.

She relented with a groan full of pain and frustration and happiness. “Isaiah Conrad.”

“Harrington,” they both said.