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WENDY WITWER

The Names

Before I turned seven, my one regret was that I had too many names. Not the slick kind, where the syllables roll on and on like water over smooth stones. My names sounded like the time I saw a man running his bike into a pottery stand at a market: metal twisting and clay shattering. Somehow, my mother—my proper English mum trapped in an American's body—made my names into a kind of melody, but only because she savoured each of the syllables so much. Anyone else who tried to pronounce the full business failed fantastically.

My parents had the most British names imaginable: Elizabeth and James. How two people named for monarchs could come up with my jumbled names was a question I

pondered frequently. Everyone called me Ash for short, one of those nicknames that was easy to yell during impromptu football matches in the park; only Mum used more than one of my names at any given time. She always said my names were a representation of what all men should strive to be: tough, yet lyrical. She was careful to say that the most when Dad was home, arching her eyebrow and elevating the pitch of her voice. The grin that always accompanied such pert assessments of the male sex always negated the nagging tone she tried to achieve—her jovial British lawyer of a husband couldn't help but laugh. She always said she had to be lyrical enough for the both of us. That wasn't to say Dad didn't give his best effort, though. He did try. We went out together every weekend to experience as much culture as Mum could possibly inject us with, claiming that not taking advantage of London's many free museums and exhibits would be a serious offense against Art.

The mysteries of Van Gogh and Dali could never captivate Dad, but all of us—especially Dad—loved foreign films. We took lots of trips to cinemas in different areas of town, and even when I was too young to decipher the subtitles, I loved to guess at the stories by the faces and sounds flashing in the cinema. A good story was always well received, no matter the language. My favourites were the Indian films, the big, Bollywood melodramas, because I loved watching the colours dance around the screen and I loved hearing Mum try to sing along to the film soundtracks in garbled Hindi when we made dinner at home. Perhaps the lavish musicals were a little much for Dad, but Mum and I were implacable in our affection for those crazy films. Hearing the resonating sitar or the heavy dhol beats wrapped me in a sort of saffron dream.

But my imagination did not live on saffron alone. My deep love, the love that sparked my blood and weaved through my consciousness, was reading.

At school, a teacher once asked us to write down our earliest memory and make a story out of it. I couldn't focus

on a particular memory because my life was already full of so many stories—some of them mine, but most of them the result of countless afternoons reading with Mum in Kensington Gardens. She usually took me when Dad was at his office working on cases, but he'd come with us on weekends. During the week, Mum always carried a picnic basket full of good food and good novels, and I carried my football. We'd make our way to our favourite tree, calling hello to Prince Albert's monument and passing the row of trees that bordered his huge memorial. Sometimes Mum would ask Al how his day was, if he thought we'd get rain that day, if he'd seen the Beckhams strolling in the park that day—anything to make me giggle.

We'd find our spot, where Al was just out of view, and we'd start spreading the blanket and setting up the food. She'd hum for a while—a Bollywood tune, typically—then she'd ask me what story I wanted to continue that day. Should we find out what happened on the island with Robinson Crusoe? Or maybe see if the Musketeers are able to get to the Duke of Buckingham in time? Perhaps Roxanne has finally found out that Christian used Cyrano's letters. I'd pick a story, then she'd read out loud while I kicked the football about. If Dad came, then we'd pass the ball back and forth, but when he wasn't there I used a nearby tree as target practice, watching the black and white ball thwack against the trunk and only stopping if the story got really exciting. Sometimes a story would catch me completely by surprise; when Mum read me the bit about Hamlet's uncle poisoning Hamlet's dad, I accidentally kicked my ball directly into a passing runner's head. I didn't see that one coming.

Mum loved reading long names to me in those stories, threatening to give me more and more middle names with each new novel. I think she would have given me every name Shakespeare ever put in his plays if my passport had more space. Ultimately, she settled for five names: Ashton Yashardovan Kapoor Horatio Brown.

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James gently lifted the blankets and slipped into bed next to his wife. Elizabeth's eyes looked blank, distant, caught in some whirl of subconscious he couldn't penetrate. He settled himself, smoothing the sheets and blankets on top of him and fluffing his pillow. He laid his head down and watched her, examining the fine lines that were beginning to creep around her eyes and mouth even when she wasn't smiling. He reached over and lightly rested his hand on hers. "Lizzy, it'll work in the end. It has to. You'll see."

She paused for a moment then nodded her head, making a faint swish sound against the pillow.

Through the open window, James could hear a group of men wailing drunken congratulations to each other. One or two cars passed, and a dog howled at the men. The sounds echoed up to their third-level window, filling the space between James and his wife. On a different night, they might have giggled over one man's slurred epithet at the offending dog or created wild stories about their lives—but not tonight. A small breeze blew in, making tiny ripples in the curtains near the window and in Elizabeth's hair. He waited, watching her half-closed eyelids and feeling her breath close to him.

"I'm just so afraid for him," she finally whispered.

"I am, too." He gave her hand a squeeze and continued, "But we can't avoid it anymore. He's asking too many questions—kids at school are asking too many questions. I'm out of empty answers."

She sighed. "I know, James. I know." The gold flecks in her hazel eyes began to reflect more brightly, shining with saline as tears slipped down her face. "Will he ever forgive us?"

"Shh," James whispered, bringing his hand up to brush her tears away with the pad of his thumb.

Her tears turned to sobs, and she squeezed her eyes shut. James pulled her close to him, resting her head on his chest and humming softly to her as her body shook. "I don't want to

hurt him,” she repeated over and over. The nighttime sounds out the window decreased to a still hush, the dark blue sky faded to a deep black, and slowly her sobs began to soften.

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Before things changed, I used to ask Mum what my names meant, why she chose them. She always responded with something clever to make me chuckle and forget what I’d asked. But somehow the question would always spring back into my head, and I’d search for answers on my own. The Horatio and Brown parts were easy—Horatio for Hamlet, Mum’s favourite play, and Brown for Dad’s last name. That time when we read Hamlet in the park, I made Mum stay until it got dark and cold so I could hear what happened to Horatio in the end. Her voice was shaky when she read the last scene—Ophelia had already snuffed off by that point—and I felt sorry when Hamlet had to go, too. But I was secretly happy that Horatio outlived all of them, that he was picked to tell their story.

Two of my five names I understood. The other three were a mystery. When I asked Mum about Ashton, she said something about finding a ton of ash in my ears when I was born. My best mate Danny’s dad was a doctor, and he said babies are never born with ash in their ears. Mum laughed so hard when I told her what Danny’s dad had said that little tears sprouted in the corners of her eyes. I didn’t wonder so much about Ashton as the others, though. Ashton was a strong English name, Dad said, and that was all I needed to know.

Kapoor was more difficult. Of course, a few Bollywood actresses had that last name, but Mum avoided films featuring either of the infamous Kapoor sisters. Nothing was as frustrating to Mum as a perfectly good Bollywood adventure botched by too much hip shaking. Other than in Bollywood, I saw Kapoor on adverts all over London, especially since we went for Indian food all the time. It naturally came with loving Indian movies, Mum said. Dad liked his curries as spicy

as possible, but Mum and I liked the milder, more flavourful stuff. Mum knew loads of the restaurant owners, and when I was really little she started learning proper Hindi. She'd rehearse the devanagari alphabet with me sometimes—ka, kha, ga, gha, and so on—and she taught me a few phrases so I could make the owners and their wives chuckle. They loved me as much as they loved Mum, though probably because I would unknowingly propose marriage or profess undying devotion to them in my film-influenced smattering of Hindi. Maybe Kapoor came from one of the owners, or maybe from a movie. It still didn't make any sense; I'd rather be spared the confusion of having an Indian name than honor a bloke who made brilliant naan.

The one that really puzzled me was Yashardovan. Never, outside of my own name, had I heard of anyone else called Yashardovan. Yashardovan was the ultimate enigma.

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“We'll be fine, Mom,” Elizabeth said. She walked quickly from the sink to the stove, squishing the phone between her cheek and her shoulder as she went. “Yeah,” she mumbled, turning the heat down on the burner that was threatening to scorch her alfredo sauce. “Uh huh. Mmm.” She grabbed the whisk and started swirling the contents of the pot while she listened to her mother offer comforting—but repetitive—affirmations of support. “Mom, we can't wait that long to tell him. You and daddy aren't coming to England for another four months.” The steam from the sauce slowly condensed on the phone until it started to slip from under her cheek. She grabbed the phone just before it plunked into her sauce. “Mom, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow to tell you how it went, ok? Love you.”

Elizabeth clicked the phone off and set it on the counter, taking a moment to survey the state of her interrupted dinner preparations. A large pot of water was boiling on the stove waiting for the noodles she hadn't unwrapped, and the oven

beeped that it was ready for the chicken she hadn't begun to broil. Elizabeth sighed, brushing a lock of hair out of her face and trying not to think about the tile floor she hadn't swept yet.

The faint smack of a football against the wall reverberated down the hallway. "Ash, honey, no football in the flat," she called, cringing. She cupped both hands over her perspiring face, shook her cradled head slowly, and muttered frustrated sentiments to herself. Elizabeth stood in that spot for a few moments, disregarding her unfinished dinner and thinking of the small boy with a floppy shock of jet-black hair just a few metres away.

Ashton crept into the room unnoticed, clutching his ball to his chest and heaving a sigh of boredom. She whipped around to face him, straightening her apron and blinking away the moisture gathering in her eyes. She smiled. "Ash, I didn't even hear you come in. You'd make an excellent musketeer."

His mouth twisted into a wry grin. "Musketeers just need to shout and fight, Mum. Not be sneaky."

She laughed. "Too right. But I have a mission for you, anyway. How would you like to sweep the floor while I finish dinner? Dad should be home from court soon."

Ashton dropped his football and walked over to the pantry, grabbing the broom and waving it around like a sword, calling out for Athos and the other musketeers to help him defeat his crumb-and-dust foes. Elizabeth began preparing the pasta and snuck small peeks at his antics when he wasn't watching.

An hour later, the small family was seated at the dinner table discussing the day's activities, munching on the result of Elizabeth's labours. Ashton gushed enthusiasm about the goals he'd scored that day in the park, and James told them about his court cases, making Ashton laugh at his description of the sleepy judge who kept asking James to repeat his statements.

Elizabeth watched her two boys thoughtfully, trying to laugh with them but growing more and more quiet as the meal progressed. She scraped her fork around the uneaten food on her plate. When the fork began making light tapping sounds against the plate she realized that her hand was shaking. Her breath became shallow and she could feel beads of sweat gather on her face. She looked at James—a shadow passed between them. His face fell, and he slowly nodded.

Ashton looked back and forth between his parents, and his smile slowly evaporated. “Mum? Dad? What’s wrong?”

Elizabeth’s eyes were locked on her plate, and James roughly cleared his throat. The clock’s tick seemed to echo in the room, ringing in their ears. Elizabeth’s eyes slowly traveled to the window, and she could see the sky begin to blacken. She wanted to reach out and wrap herself in the darkness, disappearing into an anesthetic night.

“Ashton,” James began, “we have something to tell you.”

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I found out what Yashardovan meant a few weeks after I turned seven. Yashardovan meant that my world was fractured. Yashardovan meant that Shakespeare and Dumas couldn’t define my existence anymore. Yashardovan meant that the green of Kensington and the warmth of our flat was a life I was given by chance.

Yashardovan was my father’s name. My real father’s name.

Mum and Dad took turns telling me about who I really was. Dad began by telling me again how he and Mum had met—she was a pretty American art student visiting Cambridge for a semester, and he was a serious Brit who thought he had no time for anything but law books before she blew in to the university. But the part I’d never heard before was that a few years after they were married and settled in London, they found out that she couldn’t have children. They tried to explain in small, simple phrases, and somehow my mind

wrapped around the information, like I was being reminded of something I knew deep down.

Mum took comfort in art, in plays, in music, in foreign films. She discovered Indian films while walking around a suburb of East London one day when she passed a small video shop with exotic adverts showing glitzy women and well-dressed men. Intrigued and somewhat amused, she entered. The clerk in the store was a young Indian girl from a remote village in the Punjab region; her bubbly enthusiasm for her store was contagious, and she and Mum became fast friends. That shop clerk—the petite, excitable Anjuli Kapoor—was my real mother.

Anjuli's strictly conservative, Hindu family had cut her off completely when she ran off with a dashing Muslim who'd been visiting her town for a friend's wedding. They rushed to London and tried to start a life there; Yashardovan served food at an Indian restaurant and Anjuli became a clerk at the video store. When Mum met her, Anjuli had just become pregnant. A few months into the pregnancy, Yashardovan disappeared. Mum tried to help Anjuli as best she could, but Anjuli was crushed. Her parents wouldn't acknowledge her, exclaiming that any daughter who chose the Angrezi way above their way was dead to them. She was expunged from their will and from their lives, and she was stranded in a foreign land with no way to raise the baby she was carrying.

Mum and Dad told me about the night I was born. There were complications, Mum said, and Anjuli lost a lot of blood. I was delivered strong and healthy, but Anjuli faded quickly. Before she died, Mum promised to always take care of me. "Make him an English sahib, Lizzy," Anjuli pleaded. "Give him what I couldn't."

Anjuli gave me my life—and hers with it. She also gave me her names.

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Ashton was silent for three days. James still kicked the football with him, and Elizabeth still read to him, but no matter what they tried, he would not speak. Elizabeth would weep at night in her husband's arms and awake the next morning to Ashton's silence.

On the fourth day, she took Ashton to the park as usual, but she carried only one large novel in the bottom of the picnic basket. She didn't try to make Ashton laugh by calling salutations to Prince Albert—instead, she went directly to their tree. Ashton followed behind her with his shoulders slumped and his feet dragging. When the blanket was spread, he sat down and stared into the distance, his face expressionless.

Elizabeth felt familiar tears fight their way to the surface, but she clenched her jaw to stop them. She looked at Ashton for a long time, studying his caramel skin and deep eyes and watching his dark hair ruffle in the wind. She pulled the novel out of her basket and set it gently in front of her.

"Ashton," she said, the sound coming out more firmly than she'd expected. "I'm going to start reading you a very large book. It's called *The Far Pavilions*. It's got adventure and fighting, which we both love, but this is a special book." She paused, trying to detect some sort of reaction or interest in his large brown eyes. Finding nothing, she continued anyway. "Ashton, your first name came from this book."

His eyes narrowed and he looked at her, flinching as if he expected a verbal blow.

She smiled, trying to ease his discomfort, and continued. "There's a boy named Ashton in this book. He was raised in hills that looked like this"—here she showed him the glossy cover of the novel—"and he looked a lot like you. His life was kind of like yours as well. His whole childhood he grew up thinking he was an Indian servant, but it wasn't true. You know what he was, Ash?"

He shook his head slowly, eyeing the book cover.

“He was the son of a rich British woman who died right after he was born. But the woman who raised him loved him so much, and they were so happy together, that he always called her Ma-ji. She may not have been his first Ma, his real Ma, but she was the Ma that always stayed with him and loved him. You know what Ma-ji means in Hindi? Remember, honey?”

Ashton hung his head, staring at the blades of grass before him. He sat there, motionless, for several minutes. Elizabeth tried to see his face, tried to read his features, but he hid his eyes from her. Small wet splotches appeared on the front of his shirt from the tears dripping slowly off his cheeks. His shoulders began to shake, and his silent tears soon turned to sputtering sobs. He stood up and tentatively walked the few steps to Elizabeth, his knees wobbling. She caught him in her arms, and as she rocked him and smoothed his hair, he finally whispered: “Ma-ji means Mum. It means Mum.”

He cuffed his tears away with his sleeve and twisted in her arms so he was sitting in her lap. “Read it to me, Mum. Tell me about Ashton.”

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WENDY WITTWER recently graduated from BYU with a bachelor’s degree in English. Her other prestigious accomplishments include winning a gold medal for thumb wrestling, beating her older brother in Risk once, and co-authoring an unpublished book of limerick verses about the O.J. Simpson trial in the fifth grade. She now lends her editorial support to a Big Kid Company. When she’s not vanquishing apostrophe offenders, she can be found reading Victorian literature, spreading Bolly cheer, and wishing she were in England.