

Toni McIntyre
NAMESAKE

I was to be named Katie. There had been little debate about it. Mom was fond of the name, Dad didn't care either way, and the extended family thought the name was adorable. At fourteen weeks in the womb, I was Katie. My skin was still transparent, but my bones were growing harder by the day and I'd learned by then how to suck my thumb. At twenty weeks I could hear external noises. When I fluttered out and kicked my mother she pressed her hand to her belly and soothed me by repeating my name over and over, "Katie, Katie, Katie."

I had only my lungs left to develop when, at 31 weeks, my name changed. Mom had gone to visit my grandmother and at some point during the visit, my grandmother took a turn towards the maudlin. Random hysterics ran in the family, a byproduct of Italian blood. She cried and insisted that no one would remember her after she was gone. My mother is made of some stern stuff, but she was heavily pregnant and, faced with her mother crying, felt an uncontrollable urge to add to the waterworks. It seemed neater, in the moment, to offer to name me, the baby, after my grandmother. So someone would absolutely remember her after she died. It did the trick. My grandmother stopped her crying, Mom avoided a total breakdown, and in a moment I went from Katie to Toni.



When my grandfather Owen died, my brother Owen spent most of the wake trailing after my grandmother. She dragged him from one group of tittering old ladies to another, introducing him proudly. My grandmother presented him to every new cluster of cooing old ladies. They clutched their chests, sniffled and said, "Oh! The namesake."

The presentation comforted the women. Owen Eugene, my grandfather, was dead, but—standing before them was Owen James. Not quite the same, no, but close enough to reassure them that a piece of my grandfather still walked the earth. It had to have comforted my grandmother too because she kept at it. There were eight of us grandchildren, but Owen was the only one that day to meet my grandparents' entire church choir.

When we pass along a name, we pass along the hope that the namesake will emulate the human origin of that name. At some point we wish it so much that it becomes almost tangible, a tether from person to person. We look for evidence of shared personality traits because we want them so desperately to be there. Owen, sixteen and broad shouldered with my grandfather's pale freckled skin, was the Once and Future King of that funeral. My grandfather has been dead ten years now and we are still quick to point out moments where my brother is acting particularly like my grandfather.

"He's just like your grandfather when it comes to money," Mom said. "Cheap."

Mom continued down the line. My sister Helen is just like my Aunt Helen, a born shopper and a reckless driver. My grandmother and I loved to read, to paint and to over-feed people. That left my youngest brother, Robert. Mom frowned.

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She wasn't sure about Robert. He wasn't anything like her brother Robert.

"Maybe Robert gets to be his own person," I said. Mom laughed, dismissing the idea with the wave of her hand.

My Aunt Helen wasn't related to me biologically. She was my grandmother's childhood friend. My sister Helen shares no DNA with my mother's beloved Aunt Helen, but still Mom loves to talk about how similar the two of them are. She believes that in naming my sister after her aunt, there was an alchemic effect that endowed my sister with the personality traits of her aunt. Many of us believe in something similar. We want to believe in it. We revel in those moments of discovered similarities between the older relative and the namesake. We are triumphant, for we have discovered a kind of immortality.



I wonder what it would be like to take off my name the way I take off a coat. To pack away one name with my baby blankets and bring out another with my college sweatshirt.

When my siblings and I were little and we whined to our mother that we were hungry she would pipe back, "hello Hungry. I'm Mom." It wasn't terribly original, doubtless its been said by countless mothers for eons to temporarily silence whiney children. I think about the morning and the moments after I wake up, when I often decide how I'll feel for the rest of the day. Today I was sad, so maybe my name today will be Sad, to fit the occasion. It could change as the day went on. Should the rain clouds drift away I could stop being Sad and become Content. I'll have a new name for every hour, for every moment, for every interaction or situation. I stumble and trip over a crack in the sidewalk and become Clumsy. I'm searching for words during a coffee date and I'm Awkward. No, I'm AWKWARD. Maybe some days I won't have an alphabetic name at all, but a collection of symbols. A grouping of squiggles that look particularly annoyed. I'd punctuate every experience with a new name, a reaffirmation that I'm breathing. I'm feeling, changing with every moment.



While naming a newborn after a still living, older, relative is seen as bad luck in the Netherlands and in some Jewish communities, all the existing folklore expresses concern for the baby, that the Angel of Death, who is incredibly accident prone in all of these stories, might come to escort the older relative to the great beyond and, confused, accidentally cart off the baby instead. Nothing I read mentions anything about the child potentially containing any evil. The primary worry is never for the older relative.

I think I stole from my grandmother. More than just her name, I stole the life she wanted to live. She was a creative soul, an artist and a writer. She was always brimming with emotion, happy or sad, she felt everything. She was cursed by circumstance, having the bad luck of being born in an era when girls from middle class immigrant families didn't have careers—they had babies. If a family could afford to send a kid to college, it sent the boys. My grandmother was engaged at eighteen, married at twenty-one and pregnant at twenty-two.

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She taught me how to draw. I remember the desk she had in her living room. It was a tall drafting desk and I felt eight feet tall when I sat in front of it. It had a glass top and my grandmother slipped keepsakes underneath: telephone numbers, doodles, notes to herself and newspaper clippings. She let me draw using the real big girl pens, not the Crayola sort that washed out easily. In the margins of the newspaper, where she'd been busy filling in the word jumble, she drew a picture for me, one line at a time. A long oval gained a swoop of a line that I watched become a nose. The smallest curve became an eyelid and quick flicks up with her pen gave it eyelashes. It was like a miracle, to me, the way the lines became something recognizable. A fashionable woman, the kind you used to see in vintage Good Housekeeping magazines, with lowered eyelids, tiny painted lips and a sweeping hairstyle. She'd draw a flower for me, then, and show me how the petals came together in the center to flow down into the stem. I took the pen and my jumbled attempts at sunflowers joined hers, dotting the margins of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

By the time I was ten she'd been published a handful of times in the *Inquirer*. They weren't anything too big, mostly small pieces that had to do with the immigrant experience and her family. Still, they were essays that had been legitimately published. She had a typewriter that I delighted in smashing my hand down on so that as many keys as possible would all leap up at once, as if bursting out of a heavy sleep, and slap the blank paper. If I hit hard enough I probably could have broken the machine, but Grandma just replaced the paper every once and a while so I had a fresh canvas, and left me to it.

I think I have too much in common with her—to the point where it becomes eerie. We both tend to cry at the drop of a hat. Our emotions not just on our sleeves, but climbing up our palms and stuck to our fingertips. My grandmother and I have the same nose, a low angle that ends in a button, not too small, not too large. We have the same smile. When our lips creep up into a grin our cheeks lift and the lines that form at the ends our smiles look like the less than and greater than signs I first encountered in elementary school math class. Our smiles, situated in the middle, are both less than and greater than.

Taking stock of our similarities makes me think that the moment I changed from Katie to Toni, I began to take life from my grandmother. My life is just beginning as hers is disintegrating. I feel tied to her, I'm her namesake, and I grow stronger as she fades away.



"You should think about changing your name," my aunt said to me once. She too was known as Toni, and had changed her name right after she'd graduated law school from the ornate Antoinette to the slightly more subdued Antonia. She was trying to convince me to do the same.

My Aunt Toni is a formidable human being. Growing up I was always torn between being in awe of the gall my aunt often had and the fear that I, as a Toni, would end up like her. She was a bit of a family menace. She was never content to leave well enough alone and in a family that thrived because it shoved all its unpleasantness under the rug she wasn't a very welcome intrusion. That's not to say there weren't things about her that

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were to be admired. She'd earned her degree in art, something my grandmother would have loved to do for herself. She went on to live in New York and earned her MA before putting art aside and attending law school while raising her son. When the family got together to debate anything, my Aunt Toni could always be counted on to voice her opinion, whether you wanted it or not.

I was visiting her in Las Vegas when she first encouraged me to change my name. At the time I thought that I too wanted to be a lawyer. My Aunt, the Assistant Attorney General of Nevada, was all too willing to help me out, to secure an internship for me and offer up a room in her elegant gated-community home.

My Aunt's reasoning behind changing her name was that somewhere along the line there had been a slip up in spelling and all she was doing, really, was remedying an ancient mistake. My great-grandfather's mother, who had died when he was very young, was named Antonia. When he and his wife had my grandmother, they meant to name her after Antonia. They had been in America for a handful of years, and their English wasn't so good. Something got garbled and Antonia became Antoinette. They would pronounce the name as if it were Italian, Ann-twon-yetta. The French pronunciation is meant to be Ahn-twa-net. My American mother pronounces it Ann-twa-net.

My Aunt says she changed her name because she wanted her name to be more authentically Italian. She had changed her last name by then to her husbands, Cowan, and lost her Italian last name of Zeccardi. Maybe she felt she lost something when she lost her Italian last name, and Antonia was her way of making up for it. Given the option between Antonia and Antoinette, I prefer Antoinette.

I wouldn't change it anyway, even though I rarely use it. I wasn't named after that first Antonia, the way my grandmother was meant to be. I was named for my grandmother and, clerical mistake or no, her name was and is Antoinette. So I'll remain Antoinette.



Hindu children are given two names at birth. One is the public name, shared with family and friends and the larger community. The other is a secret name. It stays a secret to protect the baby. If a witch learns the child's hidden name, she could use it to curse the child.¹

Before I became Antoinette, a name I rarely use, and before I became Toni, I was very small and I was Katie. I've had more names since my birth. My friend from high school calls me Pip. My high school gym teacher liked to call me Mac Attack. When I taught karate class I was Ms. Toni or Ms. Mac or Ms. McIntyre.

Katie is a name only Mom and I know and remember. It's mine to keep safe.

¹ Thomas Inman, *Ancient Faiths Embodied in Ancient Names* (London 1868) p. 3 qtd in Byrd Howell Granger, "Naming: In Customs, Beliefs, and Folk Tales." *Western Folklore* Jan. 1961: 27.

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I haven't seen my grandmother in months. She lives in a nursing home now.

The door to her ward in the nursing home has a lock on it with a little keypad. You need a code to get in or out. When you type in the code, you walk through the door into a short hallway with another door at the end. You wait until the door behind you has closed before you can walk through the next door and enter the ward proper. It reminds me of a bank I went to once in DC that had extra security than usual because it stored all sorts of valuable things in its vault.

The nurses say extra security is needed in the Memory Ward. I think it's a bit sadistic to name the ward after the very thing everyone inside it has lost. When I last went to visit my grandmother, I practiced my Italian with her. She seemed very cheerful, very glad to have the company. Together we played a little game of make believe while we sat down to tea. We worked to forget our immediate surroundings, the too-bright fluorescent lights in the ceiling, the cheap plastic vinyl that covered every table and allowed for easy-clean up, my grandmother's dirty and unkempt hair and the fact that I spent the entire time on the edge of my seat, prepared to run away like the coward I admit I am when I'm faced with the ugly side of aging. My grandmother didn't have to try as hard as I did to wash away the dull nursing home walls and the vacant-stares of the other patients. She was cheerful as could be, gazing around with cloudy eyes at what she saw now as a brilliant little café on some small corner street, perhaps in the old neighborhood, on the same block as the family grocery store. We began to prepare a menu of items the hypothetical café could offer and exchanged names of our favorite desserts in Italian with the understanding that I would climb up on the counter later and write the menu in elegant loops with chalk.

"What will we name it?" she asked me about our café. I told her I didn't know. I was awful with names. She smiled and said, "let's name it after you. What's your name?"