

Chapter X: The Name Game

“What are we going to do with you?” Gumby said, elbow on the bar, pulling his fingers through a flop of brown hair.

I gave him the whole rundown of my name between leftover late-order French fries the chef let us have instead of throwing them away.

“So you’re not really a Shelly. You’re actually a Rachel or a Rachelle.” Gumby said, and slurped foam from his beer. “You need a new nickname.”

He looked up, and I followed his gaze, as if we might find my name on the cathedral ceiling and call it down upon me.

“How about you don’t come to the window unless you hear me say Ray?” Gumby said, looking back at me, our eyes catching then sliding away to look at anything but each other.

“It’s kind of masculine,” I said, dipping a fry in ketchup.

“Add an E,” Holly said, leaning into the conversation by tapping her cigarette in the ashtray between us. She tucked her hair behind an ear and rested a hand on Gumby’s shoulder. “You know, like Raye’s Mustard.”

There was a gallon of it in the walk-in, and I knew exactly what she meant. Raye’s Mustard was all we served, along with a bunch of other Maine-made products.

“From now on, you’re Ray,” Gumby said.

He winked at me, and whispered, “A drop of golden sun.”

“Raye with an E,” Holly said, “I like it.” She pressed her knee against Gumby’s and all but slid into his lap.

The bartender wiped a damp towel across the bar and said, “You know it’s bad luck to rename a boat.” He pointed at our almost empty glasses, and added, “Another round?”

“This girl here is not a boat,” Gumby said, draining his glass.

“Besides, my name has been changed a bunch of times,” I said.

As I told Gumby, my mother thought she was naming me Rachel after a character she liked on Another World. I googled it and learned that Rachel Davis (Matthews-Clark-Frame-Cory-Hutchins) was the long-running villain/heroine of that soap opera.



Rachel(le), age three-and-a-half weeks, according to my mother's handwriting on the back.

I have no idea why the character was the inspiration for my name, but it changed the same way Rachel Davis (Matthews-Clark-Frame-Cory-Hutchins) went through husbands.

My mother's family was French-Canadian. She spelled my name the Acadian way with an extra L and E on the end, forming the word Rachelle.

"Ce n'est pas Rachel! Elle s'appelle Rachelle," my mother's French-speaking aunts laughed and tsked when they read the birth announcement in the Times Record.

This was the first revision of my name.

Rachelle sounded so pretty said in the French way. It shimmered over me, a rolling R with sparkling vowels, the L and E at the end a flourishing grand finale.



Mum wrote "Rachelle Lyn, June 1976, 5 1/2 years" on the back of this dance recital picture for Fay Pye's School of Dance. My love of costumes started early. I am sure I was already called Shelly by then.

But I spent grade school correcting teachers who never got it right. They would say “Rochelle,” like they forgot how the short sound of A functions in a word. Or “Raquel,” despite the obvious lack of a letter Q. They couldn’t even mess it up right and just ignore the extra L-E and say Rachel.

It was easier to tell them to “just call me Shelly.”

This was the third draft of my name.

I asked Dad about it. He said, “It was your nickname,” as if that explained everything.

In “The Name Game” song by Shirley Ellis, Dad sang, “Shelly, Shelly Bo-bel-ley, bo-na-na fanna fo-fel-ley. Fee fi mo-mel-ley, Shelly!”

The first time I heard the actual song, I thought there must be some mistake. That’s not how it goes. Who was Shirley, Lincoln, Arnold or Bob?



Grade school Shelly (but I am not sure what grade)

I had a cousin named Michelle, just a couple of weeks older than me. Everyone called her Shelly. So, similarly, Rachelle became a Shelly, too. We were close in age and spent time together at family gatherings, but our parents were not so close that it would be too confusing for two Shellys to exist in one extended family at the same time.

“Why Shelly,” I asked my mother when I was older. “It’s not really short for Rachelle,” I said.

She shrugged. One of the most popular girls in her Morse High School Class of 1968 was named Shelly, she said.

“She was blond and a cheerleader and outgoing,” my mother explained. She didn’t have to add that she hoped I would be all of those things, too.

Blond and outgoing could be faked. But I was no cheerleader. I was long-legged and skinny, but unfortunately “gormey,” pronounced “gaw-mey,” in my mother’s Maine accent. It meant uncoordinated and likely to trip over nothing, knock things over despite plenty of room to avoid them, or fall down at the slightest suggestion of the ground.

Nevertheless, the revision stuck. My childhood was spent as Shelly.

Rachelle was reserved for times of great emphasis, an ALL CAP and underlined reference when attention really needed to be called to something I did (or didn’t) do.

I was Rachel nevermore.

I already liked the sound of Raye.

It was simple. One syllable. It didn’t sound like Holly or Kelly or any of the other waitress names it rhymed with when called from the kitchen of The Cannery. I would never again walk off with the other Shelley’s orders - of course, there were two of us.

Raye. I wouldn’t wonder if it was me Gumby - or anyone - meant when they said it.

The bartender, who daylighted as a performing arts teacher, raised one eyebrow, curled his lip, and said, “Aargh, ye will bring down the wrath of the Gods if ye paint over ye given name. The Gods don’t be taken kindly to passing a ship off as something else.”

I shivered at his words. I was probably already doomed.

But new owners renamed boats every season. Was there a vessel in the boatyard that still carried the name it was given by whoever sailed it first?

Gumby watched second thoughts flicker in my eyes. He shook my knee, and said, “Hey, Rachel Rachelle Shelly Raye, seafarer’s wisdom doesn’t hold for you.” He leaned in, almost kissing my ear, and added, “You are not a boat.”

“I like Raye. I think it’s a great name for you. You even look like a Raye,” Holly chimed in, sliding off her barstool and moving around Gumby to stand between us, one hand loose on her hip.

He ignored her long enough to spin my stool so it faced the kitchen entrance. “Do not walk through that door unless you hear me say Raye.”

Gumby dropped a handful of dollars on the bar, slung an arm around Holly’s waist, and said, “Got it?”

I nodded and watched them canoodle toward the double-doors, Holly giggling over Gumby’s now undivided attention. She didn’t notice him looking back at me and smiling.

If Gumby called me pan-fried sole, I’d legally change my name.

No, I was not a boat. But I worried about the sailors’ superstition anyway as I sipped my next beer. Was I trying to pass myself off as something I was not? It would help if I had any idea who I was in the first place. I already felt lost in the sea of identity. My name was the least of it. It was always mutable. Did I become more or less of who I was with each revision? Did I “smell as sweet” by any other name?

I finished the crispy bits in the bottom of the fry basket, savoring them as I tucked Gumby's grin into my heart.

"For magic consists of this," Ursula Le Guin wrote in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, "The true naming of a thing."



Raye, 1994