Family Names

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I was ten when my mother changed our name from Greenberg to Greene. I had no idea why she did this, nor, presumably, did she. It had to do with the breakup of her marriage, that was clear—she no longer wanted his name. But why, I asked later, when I was old enough to wonder about such things, didn’t she go back to her maiden name?

He was Jewish, she wasn’t, she’d say—which still didn’t make a lot of sense. In the WASP California suburb where we lived, there weren’t enough Jews for me to know what this might mean. When I was 16, my friend Ronnie Adler and I had a deep discussion of what “Jewish” meant, at which point I determined to go back to the name Greenberg. But it was too late. I was by then irrevocably and irreparably, Gayle Greene.

The breakup of my parents’ marriage was bloody, awful, catastrophic. Not for them the clean cut, but the long slow tear. They both said they’d had some good years, but it must have been before my time because all I remember was the fighting—but then, I remember little of my childhood. I like to think there was chemistry between them. They were an attractive couple. He was dark, intense, full of arrogance and charm, a New York Jew fresh out of Yale; she was a dark, blue-eyed beauty, with a straight nose and splendid cheekbones, set off, in the old photos, by smart rakish hats worn with square-shouldered suits.

I was seven the first time she left him, one of the few days of my childhood I do remember. We were living in an old wood frame house in San Jose. She came and got me at school. “C’mon,” she said, “we’re going.” “Where to?” I asked. “Miami.”

So we left on a train to Florida, my brother, age two, my mother, and I, on the first of our transcontinental treks. We followed my aunt and grandfather, and the three of us moved in with the two of them. We’d done this before, moved in with them in the house in San Jose—I think that’s why they’d fled to Florida. Shortly after we caught up with them in Miami, they moved out again, leaving us their house, again.

My father followed us the next summer, and the next. He tried to get her to come back. There were scenes. He’d take us to the beach, my brother and me. There’d be a woman who’d appear from somewhere and join us on the beach. Roberta. Ronnie. Sometimes the same woman, sometimes a different woman. As he dropped us back at the house he’d say to me, “Don’t say anything to Mom about Roberta.” Yet he wanted her back.

In 1953 she agreed to return. I was ten, my brother was five. Another long trek across the country to move in with him in a small apartment in San Jose—the four of us piled into two rooms near one of the hospitals he worked at; and then the fighting again. He would stay out all night. He was a doctor, he got to stay out, he made house calls—until one night the physician’s exchange (which is what they had in the days before beepers) called. They kept calling all night, asking where was the doctor, where was the doctor, then toward dawn there came one last call saying, “Never mind—the patient is dead.” (Can I be remembering this right? It sounds so melodramatic.)

My mother knew where he was. I don’t know how she knew,
but she knew. She got dressed. I mean dressed up. I can see her now, a severe suit, high, stiff shoulders, her mouth painted red, a Joan Crawford look. Furious, she was. And knew just where to find him. “Wait here,” she said.

My brother and I waited anxiously through the morning. She returned hours later. “C'mon,” she said, throwing a suitcase on the bed. “Whereto?” I asked.

Somehow we landed in Los Altos, a suburb 15 miles north of the suburb we had left. Near enough so he could have his family, yet far enough so he could have his other life. Nice for him, but not so nice for my mother, alone in her forties, in the fifties, in the suburbs. He gave her a house, a car, and a weekly allowance. For which she paid dearly. He'd come up to see us Sunday nights. I guess in his mind we were still a family, but all I remember was the fighting. They fought over the bills, over money, though as far as I could see she spent nothing—she'd furnished our house at the Salvation Army and let her clothes (and ours) go to rags. After he'd leave, she'd scream and rage and threaten to kill herself, and my brother and I would try to calm her. By Tuesday or so she'd pull herself together. Then the next Sunday, he'd come up again.

And so we settled into the life that was to last for some years. My mother, my brother, and I stayed in the small ranch-style house in Los Altos, and I got to go to the same school for more than two years in a row. She gave piano lessons. I'd come home from school, stomp down the hall, slam my bedroom door, but it followed me, surrounded me: the sound of her sorrow, in the passions of Chopin and Debussy, Liszt, Schumann, Grieg, filling the small house my father had landed us in, with great sad rolling chords.

I don't remember exactly when Maria entered the picture. The other woman. Another other woman. (One of the women on the beach?) But there she was suddenly, around a lot. Vivacious, Italian, exotic accent. Looked a lot like my mother, actually. The same heart-shaped face, straight nose, black hair, and blue eyes. Shaped like her, too. Or shaped the way my mother had been once, 24 years before.

For she was that much younger. Closer to my age than his, she was. And fun. A good time, a good cook, a good storyteller, full of laughter—at least at first. A light touch for that lugubrious man. As fun as my mother was not, for in those years my mother did not have much to be fun about.

Maria had something of the old world about her, a traditional woman, skilled at cooking, people, and warmth. And kind, I remember that especially. It could have been a horror, the other woman—the other, so much younger, woman. But she respected my father's desire to be a father, such as it was. Oh, she could be angry, but she'd do it differently from my mother, who'd smolder, the way he did, for days; Maria would blow up and then let it pass.

Or at first she did, because I recall their fights getting fiercer, sounding more like my parents'. She later told me about the other women. No need to tell me. What I did not know were the details—the 16-year-old, the druggie, the movie star. She put up with a lot.

And she became one of the things my mother and father fought about. His provincial Italian, my mother called her. She made fun of her dumb friends, made fun of her homemaking, fancied herself above all that. My mother was a serious person, Maria was not. Mother was political, Maria was not. Mother cared about things like nuclear disarmament and Zen Buddhism and poetry. Not a traditional woman. Not an easy thing to be in the fifties, in Los Altos.

Twenty years passed before my mother let up on her. It was his illness that changed things: the two women came together over his hospital bed. It was impossible for my mother not to forgive Maria through all that; she was so obviously devoted, had made him her life's work. Besides, I think Mother had caught on by then—Maria being around meant she wouldn't be the one who'd get stuck with the nursing.

When he got old and ill, the sting went out of him. Out of all of them, actually. My parents became friends. They became genuinely fond of each other. He'd come up Tuesdays and take her out to lunch.
Squire her about, opening the car door for her, handing her her cane, helping her as she fumbled with the seat belt. He was more patient and loving than I remember his ever being in their youth. They'd have lunch in downtown Los Altos and stroll down the main street. Nothing to distinguish them from any other white-haired couple making their way arm in arm down the sidewalk, bent over walking sticks.

When his heart began to fail, he was told not to drive, and their weekly lunches came to an end. But I remember one Tuesday he defied doctors' orders and drove the dangerous freeway up to Los Altos to see her. Left a note on the kitchen table for Maria, “Be back soon.” Maria was furious. He wasn’t supposed to drive, it had once brought on an attack. He’d risked that to have lunch with my mother.

I’m not sure when Mother went back to the name Greenberg, but I do remember the day I found out. We were notarizing a legal document, putting a property into a trust. The papers had been drawn up in the name of Greene, naturally, since this was the name she’d gone by for 40 years. But when asked for identification, she could produce nothing with Greene. Everything, her driver’s license, her library card, said Agnes Greenberg. “Why?” I asked. Surely this was not sentimentality. “Social Security,” she muttered under her breath, and said something aloud, defensive, to the notary about a “professional” name.

Maria had been calling herself Greenberg for quite some time. He had, of course, never married her, since he and my mother had never divorced. One day I noticed that Maria had taken to wearing a ring. Later, when he became ill, it was a matter of more than pride that she pass as the wife—she had to negotiate legal stuff, sign consent forms for emergency measures, transfusions, and so forth. She was like a gay partner without rights, except that, since she was a woman and he a man, she could pass; so she’d taken to signing herself A. Greenberg.

The one time I saw her nearly lose it with my mother was toward the end. He’d had another attack and I’d rushed down from Berkeley to pick up Mother and take her to the hospital in San Jose. But when we got to intensive care, we found Maria barring the door. “You don’t understand, Agnes, he can’t see you, he can’t see anyone.” My mother sagged. She looked old—in her mid-eighties she still had the same straight nose and fine cheekbones, but tears ran down the creases in her cheeks, her wig was awry. “Why?” she asked. “We could give him some encouragement.” “Because he is—unstable,” Maria said. “He could go at any moment.” I suddenly understood her embarrassment—only family was allowed in the intensive care unit and she had signed herself in as A. Greenberg. If she was A. Green-
berg, who was this other A. Greenberg?

She was utterly devoted to him through that time—sat by the bed, held his hand, sang him songs, told him stories, made up little games to cheer him, spoon-fed him, slept in the hospital room. I think he came to appreciate her at the last. I think he even gave her a proper name. I wondered if I turned things over to Maria, who was

Mother didn't see the point, would have

ment, then glanced as casually as she

through that time-sat by the bed, held

her face as she realized she was about to

get herself buried under the name of my

mother, and she whipped around to me,

“Gayle, what do I do?” “I think you'd

better tell him your real name,” I said. “What is your real name?” asked the man, looking up from his forms, suddenly interested, and she muttered something about a professional name.

Some days later Maria insisted on having a memorial at which I was the star speaker, much to my embarrassment, for

“Don't worry, Agnes, I'll be your friend now,” said Maria. “Good,” Mother replied, “I could use a younger woman. All my friends are dead.”

Now they just go about. And when Maria calls up and cries, my mother comforts her and counsels her about living alone, which she has had plenty of practice at these 40 years.

And now, after 40 years, Maria has her proper name. And I—I have mine. I do not have his name, though I do have his nose—I do not have a straight nose. He was the doctor, I became a doctor. Not a real doctor, of course—“In all that time you could have become a real doctor,” was his comment when I got my Ph.D. in literature—but I do have a real job. I am Professor Greene. I have a name that's not his nor any man's. Why I have this name is sort of peculiar, but it's mine.

And my mother. She has the younger woman. She has his Social Security, too. “Jesus,” I said, seeing the amount of the check, “maybe I had the wrong idea. Maybe I should have gotten married and forgotten this career thing.” But I don't believe this and neither does she.

And now we have Christmas together, the three of us, with Maria’s son and his children. When I come back to visit, my mother says, “Have you called Maria yet?” just as she used to say, “Have you called Dad?”

And so the family reconstitutes itself, in strange new forms. Ms

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