

“The Nickname Queen”

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Maxine from birth, my older sister has always had a strong grip on her individuality, a thirst to define herself beyond the name my mother chose in honor of Papa Max. Upon entering the sixth grade she decided she wanted to be called Maxx, shortening her moniker and adding a nonsensical double ‘x’ to make it look cool. When traveling she goes by Sienna, which she claims is not only a name but her alter ego. When we were about seven and ten, my sister and I had two books of baby names that we swapped back and forth, highlighting our favorites, hers in yellow and mine in pink. If either of us had, oh, nine children and, say, seven were girls, we’d know exactly what to name each one and in what order. But it was my sister who had a special gift for giving nicknames to teachers, relatives, even inanimate objects. Our family used to joke that she could name anything but a basketball. To prove us wrong she named my blue and white Anthem Insurance basketball Natasha and carried it around like a baby doll for a week and a half. In my sister’s eyes, everyone and everything deserved a name, and one name was rarely sufficient to express all the pieces of someone’s character. Each person she meets is just waiting to be re-christened, and each nickname she doles out reveals a piece of herself, of the person who wears it, and of the relationship they share.

Many of the nicknames my sister bestowed, at least in her earlier years, came from a place of endearment. She and I loved the movie Lilo and Stitch when we were little, and after a nostalgic re-watching as preteens my sister started calling our four-year-old brother Lilo. There was an idea that he would then call her Stitch, since Lilo and Stitch are best friends in the movie, but he didn’t quite catch on and Lilo got shortened (or rather changed) to LiLi. My brother, along with little cousins and kids my sister babysat, earned names like Nugget, Chicklet, and Beanster. Also on the receiving end of some loving nicknames were my dad’s brothers John and Joe. We saw them every year at Christmas and my sister would tug their sleeves for attention, teasing with nicknames like Johnny-poo and Uncle Josephine. They would reciprocate with tickles and hoist us up like airplanes. I guess that was where my sister’s nicknames first strayed from pure intentions. Being grownups, our uncles always had the upper hand, so we, with my sister being the uncontested ringleader, used nicknames to bring them down to our level. The nicknames represented the caring and playful relationships my sister and I had with our uncles, but it was entirely clear that she was trying to antagonize them and challenge their authority.

Getting to choose nicknames for others gave my sister some degree of power, and at some point she realized that. In middle school she started calling our parents Muti and Vati, the German words for mom and dad. It wasn’t as if my sister had just taken up German classes or even knew anyone German at the time. She used the nicknames because they annoyed my parents to no end. Muti and Vati was about pushing buttons, finding out how much power she had in the relationship. This new boundary pushing was further demonstrated when my sister asked her teachers to start calling her Ms. Eisenberg in the seventh grade. If she had to address them formally, then why couldn’t they reciprocate? If they wanted to teach respect she thought

they ought to demonstrate it. Ms. Eisenberg wasn't a plea for attention. It was a power trip aimed at shaking the illusion of teachers' authority.

The theme of challenging power was one that persisted in my sister's nicknames. One unwitting recipient was a substitute teacher at our Middle School named Mr. Stone, who seemed to be about one hundred years old and always on the verge of putting himself to sleep with his own monotonous drawl. Sometimes he sat in the back of the classroom making lanyards with long threads of plasticized gimp. My sister started calling him Mr. Fossil and Mr. Stone Age, and by the time I started middle school the latter was common slang. My sister was the snarky genius behind that jest, and I have often felt that my own nicknames have had the same snide undertones.

Even more than Johnny-poo and Mr. Stone Age, I have always felt that I was the one to receive the real raw end of my sister's nomenclature. It used to be the case that my sister would pick a new nickname for me each week or so at the dinner table. I almost never knew what my nicknames meant or where they came from. I don't remember even a quarter of them, but some of her favorites have been Broc, Trodgen, Leener, and Postage Stamp. I often let it slide, but I was fairly confident that Trodgen, which became Trodge, couldn't possibly be an affectionate label. It was when she would repeat the nicknames again and again in a sing-song tone that she'd get a rise from me. Then we'd both get in trouble.

The worst nickname she's given me is undoubtedly Impy. It was introduced one summer at Colonial Camp and I absolutely hated it. My sister and I went together, and one afternoon when we were having sewing circle, the girls at the camp decided it would be fun if everyone started going by their middle names. My sister, brother, and I all have the same middle name, Simpson, so my sister took the initiative and split it up. The first "S" went to our brother ("Big S"), the closing "son" to my sister ("Sonny"), and I was left with the middle "imp" ("Impy"). I resented the whole camp because everyone called me Impy. It was a big sister power play, but my parents laughed it off as the struggles of being the middle child.

I've never doubted that my sister loves me, but I'm not convinced that my nicknames are all the product of that affection. I think it probable that many of my nicknames are rooted in annoyance or aggravation, considering that the nickname era of elementary and middle school was pockmarked with spats, squabbles, and all of my shoes being thrown out our bedroom window.

In my family it's always been okay for my sister to use teasing nicknames because in so many other ways she expresses love for us. Her nicknames are often a paradox of being antagonistic and affectionate. I am able to appreciate my sister's sense of humor and find her nicknaming amusing, at least when it's aimed at other people. It helps that she no longer calls me Leener.

My sister's nickname for me now is one I love, one with indisputable etymology. She calls me Hermanita, which means little sister in Spanish. The nickname originated in our separation. I'm stuck in high school while my sister gets to backpack around South America. I think it is because we are apart, because we can no longer show our affection in little favors, that my sister started using this nickname. This nickname makes me a part of her adventures

and of her South American life from which I am so disconnected. My sister first called me Hermanita over a shaky Skype call. Unlike the nicknames she has given in the past, Hermanita is not a power trip, but rather a telling snapshot of the friendship and sisterhood we share. The only thing is, its hard to know what to call her back. That's the thing about my sister, the nickname queen, everyone calls her something different. She gets to pick what she wants to be called, a power she relishes. Her boyfriend thinks that the middle initial on her driver's license stands for Sienna because that's what she tells people. My parents hate non-traditional spellings, they cringe at Mckenzy and Mikayla, yet somehow Maxx pops up on official school transcripts- with that ridiculous double 'x'. In fact, my effusive use of the pronouns "she and "her" in writing this essay is perhaps quite telling. After all, what do you call a girl who is sometimes Maxine, sometimes Ms. Eisenberg, sometimes Sienna?