

## Hammer

Tom Brinck

7/13/94, 1/27/02

### Selecting an Identity

I heard it's legal to pronounce your name  
any way you like.

A man named Wxzyrpd, or whatever,  
won a lawsuit.

He always pronounced it "Smith",  
but a hotel clerk  
had tried to refuse his reservation  
when he didn't write s-m-i-t-h.

I heard you could change your name  
to anything you like  
without a legal proceeding,  
without a form,  
without a fee,  
just so long as  
you use the name consistently,  
just so long as you intend no deceit.

So I decided I was Tom.

### Questionable Origins

My mother could never adapt.  
She says Thomas.  
"Tom - ass"  
I tell her she has a speech impediment.

My mother still thinks  
she has the right to name me,  
but it's a name for her,  
not for me.  
I thought I had the right to name myself.

In Japan they called me Tom-u.

タム

(tamu)

Japanese doesn't have  
words that end in "m".

Somehow people just can't accept  
that I'm really telling them my name.  
Somebody's filling out a form for me,  
and they ask my name.  
I say Tom,

"Tom Brinck. b-r-i-n-C-k".

They say  
"Is it actually Thomas?"  
I say "No."  
If it were, I would have said so.

My friends ask  
what's on my birth certificate?  
I say, you know,  
that really isn't relevant.  
It says Thomas,  
but, you know, my mother had  
a speech impediment.

And even when I fill out a form  
myself,  
somehow they still change my name.  
I never told my school  
any other name but Tom,  
and yet they made me Thomas,  
and so did my church  
... and they wonder why  
I stopped coming.

I told my mother once  
of a friend  
— the nicest guy —  
who sometimes worried he was the antichrist.  
So she told me about the president:  
how he'd received a mortal wound  
and survived,  
just like the antichrist,  
and besides,  
Ronald is 6 letters  
Wilson is 6 letters  
Reagan is 6 letters  
6-6-6.  
I said, "but Mom,  
Thomas is 6 letters  
Gordon is 6 letters  
Brinck is 6 letters."  
She said

"Don't talk like that!"  
I told her "you're the one who named me."

## Family Names

In Japanese,  
my last name is Burinku.

ブリンク

But Japanese translate L's to R's  
because they don't have L's.  
So some of them thought  
my name was  
Blink.

Brinck is okay.  
I don't much have a problem with it.  
It's a little harsh.  
It ends too abruptly.  
I wanted a last name that sounded good,  
and people could spell.

In first grade my teacher gave me  
a nametag labeled "Brinch".

People have tried a lot of variations:  
of course "Brink", without the "c",

Brick  
Brinker  
Brinik  
Brinks  
Bronck.

Hey, I know I'm not alone.  
This happens to nearly everyone,  
and since people know  
that last names are so hard to get,  
you'd think they'd be a little careful.

I once had a middle name:  
Gordon.  
It sounds alright.  
No one ever made fun of me,  
except the Panamanian  
who said it sounded like the word for fat.

It's my grandpa's name.  
I think of Flash Gordon,  
but it just never felt like me.  
It doesn't feel personal.  
It feels like someone else's name,  
and I didn't need a middle name,  
so I dropped it.

My initials had been TGB,  
which are right in a line on a keyboard.  
I had a teacher who once required  
that we all put our initials on our papers.  
Handing them back,

she looked confused:  
"Who has the initials T.O.M.?"  
I raised my hand,  
and she still looked confused,  
then flustered, as she understood.

Well, now my initials are TB.  
Everyone notices  
it stands for tuberculosis  
or test-tube baby,  
telephone booth  
or toilet bowl.  
No one notices nice things  
like teddy bear.

My brother's and my sister's middle names  
come from my father's family.

They have a tradition in his family  
of giving gifts to namesakes  
every Christmas Eve.

Grandpa Gordon was in my mother's family,  
and they had no such tradition.

I was always disappointed as a child  
that my brother and sister got gifts  
and I got nothing.

My father's mother,  
grandma Doris,  
agreed to make a deal with me,  
so I became Thomas Doris  
every Christmas Eve.

## Diminutives

My driver's license always said "Thomas",  
and that was the hardest thing to change,  
and it made it difficult to convince people  
who somehow believe  
that my name isn't mine,  
that some piece of paper  
has more rights to my identity  
than me,  
that somehow the official world  
is more important  
than showing a little humanity and compassion.

My mother said  
that banks  
would refuse my checks  
if I signed them Tom,  
if the name on the check was Thomas.



She was wrong.

Eventually I got a new bank account  
with my name corrected.  
Now it's Tom.

When I was young,  
because of how I signed my name,  
people used to think my name was Jom.

A few weeks ago  
I got a new driver's license.  
I filled out all the forms —  
Tom  
Tom Brinck.  
But the person was about to copy  
my old license —  
Thomas Gordon Brinck —  
when she noticed,  
and I explained,  
"Actually my name is Tom,  
but somehow they always change it  
to Thomas."

She said she needed some I.D.

So I showed her

my credit card,  
my insurance card,  
my student I.D.

Now my name is Tom  
— without a middle name —  
Tom Brinck.

Only a few documents might disagree:  
my birth certificate,  
passport,  
social security card,  
and some other random documents  
where I told them my name was Tom  
but they changed it when I wasn't looking.

My mother told me  
that my resumé had better say Thomas,  
that nobody would hire someone  
who was so informal  
as a guy named Tom.

She was wrong.  
Though maybe someone did  
overlook my resumé  
for just this reason,  
and I'm glad I don't have that job  
where everyone must be so formal.

Thomas.

It derives from Arabic:

teoma, a twin.

In Greek, tom means  
cut, split, or divided,  
as in atom, a-tom, not cut,  
indivisible.  
What does this have to do with me?

Some people,  
who must think my name is Latin,  
have called me Thomas Brinckus.

There's tom cats,  
Tom girls,  
Doubting Thomas,  
Peeping toms,  
and famous Tom's:  
Jefferson, Edison,  
Aquinas, Mallory, Becket,  
and fictional Tom's:  
Major Tom, Uncle Tom,  
Tom Swift, Tom Sawyer.  
I always liked Tom Bombadil,  
from Tolkien.

## Respect

In high school, a guy named Travis  
kept singing the Who song to me:  
"Tommy, can you hear me..."

When I was young  
I was called Tommy,  
which is okay with me;  
I wouldn't even mind it today,  
so long as it was used respectfully.  
I probably wouldn't mind  
almost any name,  
so long as it was used respectfully.

Problem is,  
most people aren't so good  
at respect.

My name has been a lot of work for me.  
I won't even tell  
of all the nicknames I've had,  
or perhaps just a few:  
stinky brinky,  
Tom the bomb,  
and things like that.

In fifth grade, we went around the room,  
everyone telling the name

they most wished they had.  
I said Pedro,  
and everyone laughed at me.  
I changed my mind pretty quickly.

In college I started saying  
a funny phrase now and then.  
Maybe it's a bit odd,  
but I liked it.

"My name is Kukukurazhu  
I have a fat belly and so do you."  
Yet another name:  
don't ask me to explain it.  
I'm not sure I can.

I'm told my name came from  
a boy my sister liked in kindergarten.  
His name was Tom.  
So why wasn't mine?  
So why did my sister  
insist on calling me pumpkinhead  
and ruder things than that?

I never much called her names.  
Perhaps I lacked her ingenuity.

When I was young  
my father called me Putt-putt.  
An affectionate term,  
I guess for how I moved around.  
It was always kind of nice.  
I never minded  
as long as it was my father.

My mother sometimes forgot my name.  
She'd call me by my brother's name  
Ron,  
or Ronald when she's mad.  
Then sometimes she'd call me Richard.  
Who's Richard?  
Nobody I know.

I suggest to my mom  
that maybe I should call her  
Mhomas  
since she calls me Thomas.  
Most especially when she's mad.  
Maybe just maybe  
*that's* why I don't like the name.

## **Becoming Hammer**

I had an email account.

The name was brinck:  
brinck@neon.stanford.edu,  
or something like that.  
My friends kept complaining  
that I didn't answer my mail.  
I said I'd never gotten it.  
Finally I figured out  
they were misspelling it.

Some guy named Brink  
was getting my mail.  
I sent him email  
asking if he'd been getting my mail.  
He said "yes"!  
Essentially just that.  
He hadn't told me before.  
He hadn't returned mail  
that obviously wasn't meant for him.  
He didn't apologize.  
In the days before spam ever existed,  
he just quietly deleted it.

I decided to change my email address  
to something everyone could spell.  
So I made it hammer.  
I'm not sure exactly why I chose that name.  
It sounded solid, reliable.  
It wasn't intended  
to imitate anyone famous,  
or I would have chosen someone I respect  
...like Ghandi.

One place I worked  
I kept getting email  
for Susan Hammer.  
I forwarded it to her  
and let the sender know.

What was most confusing  
was when I got mail intended for  
Tom Hammer.  
The mail would always begin,  
"Hi Tom,"  
and so I'd read on,  
only to get confused.

What I didn't understand  
was why none of them had chosen  
the email address "hammer".  
They joined the company before I did,  
but they were  
hammer1  
hammer2  
hammer3

## The Feminine Equation

They said if I'd been born a girl  
my name would have been Linda.  
Now *that* would have been just fine  
... if I'd been a girl ...  
No one would change my name  
to Lhindaas.

I met a girl in the mall once.  
Her father's name was Tom.  
Her brother's name was Tom.  
Her ex-boyfriend's name was Tom.  
I thought maybe  
    this was the woman of my destiny,  
but I never saw her again.

A lot of women these days  
don't change their names  
    when they marry.  
I've decided  
    if my wife agrees  
that I'll take her name,  
or we'll choose something altogether different.  
Whatever happens,  
I'd really like to have  
    the same last name as her.  
For me,  
    it's part of the bond.

You can probably tell:  
my name is a part of my identity,  
a very personal thing to me.

There's a song by Billy Joel  
    called Christie Lee.  
I really like it.  
I relate to it.  
It's about a man in love with a woman,  
a tragic affair.  
The guy plays a saxophone.  
    I play a saxophone too.  
To tell the truth —  
    I've decided the song is about me.

In fact, Billy goes to great lengths  
just to avoid mentioning my name.  
He says,  
    "The man's name I don't remember.  
    He was always Joe to me,  
    but I can't forget the woman.  
    She was always Christie Lee."

He can't remember.  
Right.

    Christie Lee  
    Christie Brinkley  
Think about it.

## Regression

I started working somewhere new.  
I got a new computer account,  
a new email address.  
They said it could be any name I wanted,  
any name at all.

So I said  
    "hammer".  
It's what I've used for years.  
They said  
    "but that isn't your name."

I said  
    "Right. Exactly."  
I reminded them  
that they said any name at all.  
They finally agreed,  
and my email name has been hammer  
for almost a year here.

Just 2 days ago  
I tried to read my email,  
but I couldn't get in.  
It said hammer was invalid.  
I tried and tried  
and tried again.

In a sudden insight  
I tried "brinck",  
and it worked.  
Somehow my name  
just keeps coming back to haunt me.