

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.