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Sunisa Nardone Manning

A Name to Ward Off Ghosts

My grandmother and I step up to the voting station. We are in Bangkok, in what used to be the outskirts of the city. What were rice paddies when my mom was growing up are now single-family homes and shophouses, car dealerships and marketplaces. This neighborhood has the worn, comfortable quality of lived-in space: here is the lake where the old timers do tai chi; there the rusty playground I played on as a kid. Here is the ice-tea vendor who pours drinks into plastic bags tied with elastic, so her customers can hook the rubber band to their handlebars.

I have been coming and going from my grandparents' house since I was born; their Bangkok dwelling is as close to a childhood home as I get because my parents moved often. I'm also registered to vote from my grandparents' district. When I am back in Bangkok, as during the years in my twenties when I worked there, I drive out of the city center, place of highrises and foreign inhabitation, to my grandparents', to vote. My grandmother is getting too old for the stairs. Even though there is a railing I give her my arm to lean on. I am the oldest grandchild and the only girl. My name, Sunisa, is also hers. We are close. I call her Ah Ma, the word for grandmother in Teochew, a dialect of Chinese.

The voting station is an open-air building: tile floors, no fans, a shabby place. At a small desk sits a small man who wordlessly holds out a hand for our ID cards, not bothering to look up. This is good because I feel self-conscious. We are out beyond the rim where mixed children live. I grew up in the area with my American father and Thai mother, an exception to the rule that foreigners tend to live in the city center. Mom wanted to be near her parents, and Dad's office was on the outskirts anyway. I know firsthand the astonishment my part-White looks get.

Thais carry an ID card as well as their driver's license. My grandmother and I hand ours over. The man examining our cards whips his face up.

"*Two* Sunisas in one house?"

The astonishment he directs my way is not for my looks. He is incredulous at the coincidence because it isn't a common name. I'm relieved because he isn't commenting on my fair skin, double eyelids, or wavy hair, the usual totems of mixed-race appearance that people in this part of town want to discuss.

"I know." Ah Ma leans forward. She cocks her head at the voting booth man. "These foreigners," she sighs. "They believe in naming living children after living relatives."

"Imagine!"

They both laugh, and I laugh, pleased at how deftly my grandmother handles the cultural incongruity. My laugh masks a wince, too, because I am tired of defending my name against the assumptions and incomprehension of the other culture, against my other half.

Ah Ma continues: "They even think it's flattering. Honoring a relative."

"They wouldn't want a kid to have its own name?"

She shrugs. He shrugs. We are registered.

This scenario happens every time I go to vote. I think my grandmother is actually flattered by the practice, but her humor and ease speak to the flexibility and sly poking-fun that Thais direct toward *farang*, as foreigners are called.

The names I was born with are Sunisa Sayoomporn Nardone. I feel the need to explore these names, and the sounds so associated with my identity. I am someone fascinated with names and naming. When I meet a new friend and she talks about her children, the kids aren't real to me until I know their names. Lake is irrevocably Lake and couldn't be Simon or any other designation. Those syllables, the light slip into a concrete ending, become who he is. If a pregnant friend tells me that her daughter's name will be Lucia, suddenly that fetus is real. The Lucia of my mind has a habit of pulling at her mother's skirt when she is done playing with other children, and a tendency to munch cucumbers when she is nervous. As an adult she will display a predilection for distance running.

I am my parents' first child. When my mom was pregnant with me in Bangkok, they struck a deal: if they had a daughter she would get a Thai name and an American nickname. Vice versa for a son. Top contenders besides Sunisa were Catherine and Marisa, but Catherine was ruled out because it is hard to say in Thai: *Cat-reen.* Clunky. That was when they decided on the Thai name rule. Marisa, like Sunisa—notice they rhyme, a clue that they both work in Thai—is beautiful in both languages. It's hard

to convey in English how Marisa sounds in Thai, which is a tonal. The same word can take on different meanings when different tones are applied. *Mah* can be "come here," "horse," or "dog" depending on the inflection. So: *Maah-ree-sah.* High *ree*, and that *sah* syllable goes up, the flick of a tail. My folks couldn't find a nickname for Marisa that they liked. Not Lisa, not Mari. The only name they agreed on was Sunisa, Ah Ma's name. My nickname: Susie. Set.

It would seem as if the parent who won the real-name contest triumphed. But the thing to know is that in Thai, the nickname matters. Babies used to be named by Buddhist monks able to judge the most auspicious sounds to associate with a new human's destiny, according to the time and date of their birth. Many Bangkokians have outgrown their belief in this practice, but my mother, for example, was named by a monk. That makes the nickname the one bestowed by family. It is the most intimate. Once you know someone it would be cold to call them by their real name—to call me Sunisa and not Susie. In Thailand's gloriously subtle and nonconfrontational culture, you know you aren't liked if someone uses your formal name. You could also tell if you were in trouble at work. There, real names are outside names: the name to show the world, the name to ward off ghosts. Inside names are spoken by those who mean no harm.

My mother's name is Sayoomporn. I was named Sunisa for my grandmother, Sayoomporn for my mother. Strong matrilineal roots delivered me, finally, to my last name: paternity. Sunisa Sayoomporn Nardone: grandmother, mother, father. Surrounded by family names, I belong to both lineages. I never minded that my last name is my father's. I felt balanced; the setup seemed fair.

I am always Susie in Thailand, yet I go by Sunisa in the West because I came to realize how much I want to claim my Thai roots. Whichever place I am, the name I use highlights the way I am different to the culture I am in.

When I worked in rural development in Thailand during my early twenties, my colleagues adopted the shortened nickname of my family and started calling me "Sie." In English the first syllable is used: Sue. In Thailand it's more common to hold onto the last. When colleagues and bosses there called me "Sie," it produced the softest feeling, like being held and hugged. I wouldn't want to be called Sie by just anyone, but there, then, it worked well. I spent those two years polishing my Thai to formal speaking levels, and adapted my direct, Western meeting style to Thailand's roundabout norm. It helped that the people who taught me about

workplace relations called me Sie. It made my learning curve intimate: our problem, not just mine.

Nicknames can be cute. When I was growing up, common ones were Fon—rain; Fah—blue or sky; Fai—cotton. Nowadays there seems to be a vogue for foreign names: Luella, Lucy. Some names from English don't translate well in the singsong of Thai. Robert, which was almost my brother's first name, becomes *loh-berht*, a word that sounds a little like "explosion," surely not an auspicious meaning. When I was three and a half, my parents decided that I could choose whether my brother would be Robert or Michael. I picked Michael, and he is Michael Robert Nardone. What a different texture his name has compared to mine. The outward face of it is so Anglo, White. His nickname is Mai, which he translates as wood. It can also mean stick, or twig, and though he doesn't like those translations as much, I think the diminutive association is a good one. Modesty is prized in Thailand. Names are sweet when they are just so—when they get at the natural smallness of things. Not everyone needs a name that stretches its meaning across the sky.

Often sibling nicknames come in tandem. My uncles are Tong and Tooh. My mother and aunt: Joom and Jim. The children of my former bosses are Prim, Prai, and Prip. See how a clan is created, the family made whole, yoked together in tripping, lilting sounds. I have always been a little sad that my name is so outlying from those of my three brothers. Together we are: Sunisa, Michael, William, Daniel. The younger two are half-siblings, and I have never asked my father whether, if they had been girls, they would have gotten Thai names too.

In his memoir Running in the family, Sri Lankan and Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje has one of the most melodic passages I've seen on place names.

> Asia. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S. I was running to Asia and everything would change.

"I was running to Asia . . ." The quote has always stuck with me because it's how I felt in the autumn after I finished my undergraduate degree. Instead of staying in New York City as I had planned and imagined, I found myself drawn back home, despite my father's protestations, like the tide under a full moon to the country of my birth. Asia. Those a's keep the

word open at the front and back, *aaae-siaaa*, open to possibility, open to change. It's almost a palindrome, and the slant symmetry, the not-quite-reversible nature of it, pleases my obsessive heart. I have the bug that many East Asians have: a need to create order. Just look at the multitude of organizing containers designed and sold at Muji, a Japanese everything store, one of my favorite places to soothe my compulsiveness. Over the years I have used slant symmetry to push the edge of my perfectionism away. I have taught myself to like the word Asia more than Asa, or aSa, as it appears in my mind, with an apex and accompanying symmetrical wings. If I drew two lines on a blank sheet, I would put a dot next to one of them to push the drawing out of symmetry. Then I'd endure the hair-raising effect that dot would have. I'd shiver with a deep and precise bodily discomfort. The next time I drew the picture with the dot, the dot wouldn't go against the grain of my being so intensely. The time after that, the dot might even be pleasing, more beautiful than strict perfection because it tips order into a loose, full thing. This is the way wabi sabi operates. It is the Japanese idea that slight imperfection is more perfect than the pristine. Too neat is unreal, machine-made. Asia: unruly, untamable, uncontained. Almost a palindrome, but not, which makes it better.

I first lived in the United States when I was eighteen. I moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to attend Brown University. I climbed the steps to the worst dorm on campus, with riot-proof halls and a fungus problem in the common room, and introduced myself as Susie. Friends from my first year still call me that. During my second year, I got involved with the Asian American literary magazine and with the campus group for people of mixed race. I was hanging out with more people of color, and a friend, Asian American, asked me my real name.

"It's Sunisa."

"No way," she said. "But that's so beautiful. Why are you ashamed to use your real name?"

"I'm not ashamed," I said, thinking it was a uniquely American thing to "reclaim" your ethnic name, and to assume that it was shame that would lead someone to decline to do so. I had a birth of color consciousness at university; I grew up in Asia, where people of color were the norm, so I didn't identify with the marginalization that many Asian Americans felt growing up in the United States. My Asianness was the norm. It was the White half that stuck out. The issue that bothered me is that Thailand orients too much around what White men want. It's not a problem of representation but one of cultural supremacy, power. I didn't like how

waiters at fancy restaurants jumped to take my American father's order, but if I went to the same place with my Thai mother, I'd have to hope she was wearing enough diamonds to be served with courtesy, or else she'd be ignored. My mother isn't one to dress up to impress the wait staff. She'd just speak her fluent English and pretend to be from Singapore or Hong Kong.

"I didn't think anyone could pronounce Sunisa," I told my friend.

"Believe me, we can handle it."

When she said that, I felt a wash of relief. I could own up to the name I was given without overburdening my usually White peers. Finally it occurred to me: why cater to the expectations of a White majority? I felt the first tendrils of outrage. Fresh into my time in the United States, I struggled to place the names Kate, Sarah, and Jennifer with the appropriate people. They blurred together, but I worked at it. I learned.

I started going by Sunisa in classrooms, which percolated into social settings. At first when people called me Sunisa, I blushed, embarrassed to make them use my formal name. It was stilted, too much at arm's length. Then, gradually, I came to like it. The edges of the word sounded musical to me. I was warmed by the link to Ah Ma. I liked its uniqueness in the United States. One friend told me that Susie called to mind an overweight blond waitress at an American diner, an association I was innocent of but have not since been able to put out of my mind. I did not feel, internally, bouncy and circa 1950. Sunisa seemed unclaimed by other people's imaginations. It felt like my real name, the right one for my personality. It became a talisman that pushed me into confidence in a classroom, into debate with assertive, prep-school-trained talkers.

How random that one of the first impressions we make comes from our name, since we have no control over what we will be called. My parents bestowed a winner on me. Overwhelmingly, when I introduce myself in the United States, people's reaction is to comment that it's a beautiful name. In Noe Valley, a neighborhood in San Francisco with many well-to-do young families, budding mamas get a gleam in their eye when they ask me to spell my name. "Sunisa, how lovely." They often comment that it sounds just like it is spelled. It should, since it is transliterated into English to mimic how it sounds in Thai. I don't mind that a crop of little girls in Noe Valley may have a Thai name, even though they have no associations with the language or country beyond a random stranger their mother bumped into when she was pregnant. If it works for their parents, great.

It does make me wonder what my husband and I will name our kids though, when we have them. Will we bequeath on a son an innocuous Anglo name that will cause no ripples when said in the United States? Or might we pick a Thai one, so that our quarter Asian daughter will have to defend her identity when the inevitably monolingual person asks if she speaks Thai?

Some names too far from a person's background come off as New Agey. What blithe confidence, to pick a name outside your own culture because of its mystical and exotic, if half-understood, resonance. It is a particular Bay Area texture to meet a seventy-year-old White man who bows and introduces himself as "Jai Ananda." Ananda has always been one of my favorite names, a top contender for a son. Notice its slant palindrome, how the *d* pushes the name out of order. Very wabi sabi, in my interpretation of the idea. The historical Ananda was the first disciple of the Buddha. When you read a sutra, one of the Buddha's teachings, the first line is usually: "Thus I have heard." That is Ananda, declaring that what he is about to set down is his recording of what was an oral teaching. Ananda is the scribe, a role I relish as a writer myself. He also famously convinced the Buddha to change his mind about the path for women to gain Enlightenment. At first the Buddha wouldn't admit women into the monastic order. Ananda took pity on the Buddha's stepmother and, so the story goes, begged the Buddha to reconsider. The Buddha said he would do so if his stepmother would take extra vows upon ordination. She agreed and became the first nun, or *bhikkhuni*.

Why should meeting one older, White, nice-enough American gentleman preclude naming my son Ananda? Poor man. I hope he couldn't tell how I felt about him right then, which was something like: *damn you White Buddhists for co-opting our beautiful Eastern names*. Which is unfair, because I don't take offense when non-Russians name their daughter or son Sasha, for example. I behaved territorially, un-Buddhistly—but there it is.

I don't want my children, who will be only a quarter Asian, to appear to be randomly assigned an exotic Eastern name. I don't want them to seem New Age. That may be fine for some babies—the host of Sunisas a person could meet in Noe Valley—but my discomfort comes from a desire. My disdain is a shout: This Ananda is authentic! He has a claim to this name!

After finding a sly humor in the longing of my college friends for an ethnic name, something that would reflect their feeling of difference, I find myself mired in the same longing with regard to my children. I, too, pass in America: I am fluent in English and have a decent command of

idiom. But I *am* passing. When I exist in Thai I am soothed and held by the softness of that culture and its emphasis on caretaking. Of course my longing comes from the fear that my children won't be at home in Asia. My husband is White, and I am half White. I speak Thai, but will my kids? I look Asian, but will they? How strange and poignant, to count their diminishing Asian bloodline. All this, for children still unborn.

There's another aspect to having an Exotic Eastern Name. When my husband and I sold our condo in San Francisco, our realtor, a dear friend, kept getting the spelling of my full name wrong on the pile of official documents needed to transfer the title. Finally she eliminated my middle name, Sayoomporn. "Because it has porn in it," she said. "Let's just take that off there."

I was stunned. I was silent. I didn't say anything, didn't tell her it is my mother's name, that "porn" is common in Thai names because it means merit, or blessing. It is one of the best syllables to have associated with yourself. I've always winced to see the expression come over an American face when an adult sees my middle name. Sayoomporn. It's like a middle schooler encountering an old-timer named Dick. *Please,* I want to ask. *Don't add a bouncy waitress to Sayoomporn.* I plead for the right for the name to remain treasured.

My brother, Michael Nardone, is also a writer. When he was submitting work, he got rejections with notes scrawled on the slip: Should you really be writing this story? That made me laugh. It's great that editors of US magazines are asking if the author has the right to tell a certain story. My brother grew up in Bangkok. He is also half Thai. But "Michael Robert Nardone" isn't Thai enough. My brother began going by Mai Nardone in his writing, and the objections stopped. Now he uses Mai socially, too. Again, when that practice began, I felt divided; it seemed too intimate to call him Mai in front of other people. But now I like it. Wood, stick, twig. Mai: a gender-ambiguous name, a small name, an Asian name that signals his difference because he, too, can pass in America.

Sunisa means beloved daughter-in-law. I was disappointed to learn this the first time I asked, which was late (at eighteen) because until then I had associated my name with my grandmother, and the commonality with one of my favorite people was enough. Beloved daughter-in-law? Well. I didn't like that at all. Who wants to be a role? Naming someone beloved daughter-in-law seemed like a low-level amulet against what is a notoriously difficult relationship.

When asked in the United States what my name means, I took to answering: "beloved." If my name was an amulet, I wanted it to be a talisman of love. I took perverse delight in imagining baby girls growing up with names whose meaning they never really knew. Revenge for name-filching.

Writing this essay, I asked my mom to confirm the meaning. My name is spelled สุนิสา. She looked it up.

"Actually . . ." Mom wrote to me. "It means beautiful night."

Sunisa written as สุณิสา is beloved daughter-in-law. But the way we write my name, and the way my grandmother's name is written, is the simple, easy-to-sound-out spelling. Ah Ma's parents immigrated to Thailand from China. My great-grandfather worked in a matchstick factory. Of course they didn't—couldn't— choose the highfalutin spelling for the name. They took what they could get. The easiest route to Sunisa. To write it how it sounds.

"Whaaaaaaaaat."

"It's an auspicious name for girls born on Friday," my mom added in the chat room where we exchanged texts.

"M-O-M," I typed. "I was born on a Tuesday."

In my eagerness to attach importance to my name, I'm being an American yearning for ethnic belonging after all. From what I can tell, my parents were pretty casual about picking my name. I like that. Things will work out, it implies. My name can be mine after all. Not a litany of ancestor and belonging. Not a huge name—beloved—but a small observation: what a beautiful night.