

# FROM THE BOOK OF NAMES

## MY MOTHER DID NOT GIVE ME

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Arsenia (ahr-SEN-yə): the feminine derivative of 'arsenio', meaning 'virile', in Greek

It is true that her skin is prematurely gray, and that she is unable to break into sweat or produce a personal scent. But they love her because she is quiet and unambitious, and therefore naturally able to transform into what the other girls want her to be, simply by taking her place beside them, pretending to listen. She answers their little notes on scented stationery, and attends their birthday parties, which grow more elegant and elaborate as the years pass. In this way, she becomes one of them, despite her obvious differences.

But none of this matters to her really. Only one thing enthrals her: her secret ability to disappear at will, when the conditions are right. There is nothing she loves more than to stand before the full-length mirror in her steel-colored bedroom, take off her clothes, and watch herself blend into the wall.

Soon, the girls in school begin turning into women. She knows this by the knowing glances they exchange and the way the smell of cheap cologne intensifies, when a boy passes by. They each discover, one after the other, that they can make the things they touch bloom. The world beckons, beautiful and dangerous, and they lose interest in her. She remains herself—even though, somewhere inside her, she is certain, a world is ripening quickly.

One day, scrolling through the Periodic Table of Elements, she notices the element As. She googles its properties and reads through a litany of noxious qualities. She sees herself on the computer screen, and, electrified, recognizes her true element and purpose. The world bursts into flames. Or is it only her young body that explodes, in that exuberant moment of deliverance, and turns into a pile of ash and air? You and I will never know.

*Barbara (BAHR-bər-ə): a stranger, derived from the Greek βαρβαρος (barbaros), meaning 'foreign'*

There are two Barbaras, and neither seems acquainted with the other.

The first is a diplomat's wife, always in a tweed suit, sensible heels and pearls, moving among teacups and bed linens.

The other is a weather girl in a polyester-blend suit and four-inch heels. She has caught the eye of a junior official at the foreign ministry but does not know this yet; she is too busy making an impression. She delivers her forecasts at ungodly hours, so that by the time she slips out of her heels and sinks into her great chair—the biggest piece of furniture in her tiny walkup—the diplomat's wife is slipping out of bed and into her fur-lined slippers.

She makes herself a pot of tea and catches herself thinking, "Tomorrow I must tell her to buy a real suit, better shoes, and a bed." She does not know for whom the advice is intended, but dutifully writes it down in her to-do list. But because the next day is a long one, she accomplishes only the teacup- and bed linen-related tasks.

The weather girl lingers in obscurity until the day the junior official walks into the station, declaring himself and his long-standing admiration for her. Weeks later, he interrupts her

forecast and announces, on air, that he has been posted to Paris: would she be interested in coming with him? In Paris, he buys her first silk suit, sensible leather heels, and chooses their matrimonial bed. Why is it, then, that she feels she has failed to heed a critical piece of advice from someone who loves her, but who is so far away?

*Chantal (shawn-TAHL): from the root 'cantal', an old Provençal word for stone, boulder*

Every night, they make love. And after that, as she sleeps, he creeps up her heart to plant a garden. At first, she is amused by his compulsion to transform the arid organ into an oasis. She lets him water the hard earth, turn the rocky soil. She even lets him plant (gently, lovingly, like kisses) a few innocent-looking seeds. But when they turn into sturdy little saplings, she spends an entire morning tearing them out. That evening, they make love as usual. But the next morning, he is gone.

Years later, she hears the news from a friend of a friend: a rare disease is turning him into stone. She finds him dying alone in a city apartment. He has lost his ability to move even his eyeballs. She cooks him soup, and dribbles it down his throat. But soon she realizes it is only a matter of time before his internal organs calcify. She stops being busy for him and sits where he can see her. For the first time in decades, she stops weeding her heart.

One day, his eyes turn hard and vacant. She finds his pulse, faint but steady. She lays her head on his chest and heaves a sigh of relief. She is surprised by the shower of sampaguita that falls from her mouth. She finds tiny clumps of old-fashioned santan blooming on her skin. Pink and yellow kalachuchi fall from her nostrils like snot. When she feels a tiny tickle on her left eardrum, she giggles at the thought of sunset-colored gumamela bursting out of her ear.

*Deirdre (DEER-drə): of Gaelic and Irish origin, meaning 'broken-hearted', 'melancholy'; from an old Celtic root meaning 'mysterious', 'sorrowful'*

Every night, she opens her chest to empty the little cup that people refer to as 'heart'. But in the morning it is filled to the brim. The cardiologist says it is a congenital defect; the psychiatrist, depression. She takes the prescribed medication but notes no improvement. What do they know about the wordless ebb and flow of the mysterious sea inside her?

She struggles to keep her condition a secret, and succeeds for the most part. She begins waking in places where her body has decided to rest—the bathroom, the elevator, a park bench. She leaves quickly after every awakening, the only evidence of her ever being there, a silent puddle of water.

"It was like he said," the drivers agree, even though their statements differ, one account wilder than the next.

"She crawled from beneath the car like a zombie creeping out of its grave; smelled like one too."

"Raged like a banshee, that one, with breath so foul it thickened the air."

"I saw the words come out of her mouth—I mean real words, letters and all, just like in a cartoon or a newspaper. They were small and black; they filled up the space with wet smoke, like steam. I mean, you thought it was steam, but it was her words."

In his defense, the guard on duty says only that he was responding to a situation. Something was holding up the traffic inside the tiny, five-level parking lot. He remembers the drivers clapping as he made his way down the ramp. He remembers the car, its engine still running, the driver nowhere in sight. He remembers getting into the car, intending to complete the

abandoned task. He remembers hearing her scream; the shrill wail dissolving into sobs, and then the sound of a tiny creature choking, or drowning.

They all agreed on one thing: “And then she disappeared there.” They point at a small wet spot in front of her parking slot.

The investigators stand around it. One of them touches it with his finger, licks it, and reports it is salty “not like iodized salt, but like tears.” They all nod and agree that it is most likely a human teardrop, and call the case closed.

*Erica (ER-ə-ka): in Latin, the heather plant; in Japanese, a flower*

The spaceship lands on the front lawn one balmy evening. She runs to it and calls out to the bug-headed aliens with cybernetic limbs. They go about fixing the malfunctioning craft, discreetly pointing their slender antennae away from her voice. When they are done, they enter the steel capsule, single file. The last one lingers by the hatch and takes notice of the small fresh face on the fragrant green lawn, breaking into a happy smile.

She closes her eyes, and waits to be beamed onto the ship. Instead, a sharp pain punctures her chest. Her eyes open, fill with tears. The alien looks at her with compassion. The pain pushes deeper, radiates, intensifies into burning.

And then the pain is gone. She is alone on the lawn.

She is examined by the family doctor, who finds nothing remarkable except for two dry, scaly patches, each with a raised red border, on her back. He writes a prescription.

But the patches grow, begin to itch. The doctor's ointment offers little relief, as do baby powder, cornstarch, and Dr. Wong's Antifungal/Antibacterial Soap. Her skin begins to break, crust over, then break again. She tells her family that she feels something pushing out from under her skin.

"Feel it," she says. But they stay away.

She takes to her room and refuses to come out. At night, they leave plated meals and an empty chamber pot by her door. In the morning, they find the plate empty, the chamber pot full. This is how they know she is still alive.

Then, one morning, the food is untouched, the chamber pot still clean.

They break down the door and find that she has left them, the open window, the starchy footprint on the ledge, the snowy down still fluttering around the room suggesting: wings.

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