

A NAME BY ANY OTHER NAME

by Albi Gorn

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CLAUDE, middle aged, formal, courteous, and Victorian

BARBARA, middle aged, polite, a bit flirtatious and Victorian

CLAUDE: Martha —

BARBARA: Barbara.

CLAUDE: I beg your pardon?

BARBARA: Barbara, you called me Martha.

CLAUDE: Claude.

BARBARA: What?

CLAUDE: My name is Claude. You called me Barbara.

BARBARA: No, I didn't.

CLAUDE: You said: "Barbara, you called me Martha." My name is Claude, Martha.

BARBARA: My name is Barbara, Claude, not Martha. I was correcting you. I said "Barbara, you called me Martha" to indicate that you called me by an incorrect name.

CLAUDE: Ah, I see your mistake. I didn't. I called you Martha, Martha. You must have been thinking of something else.

BARBARA: No, I was thinking of what you called me — which you just called me again — which is Martha, which is wrong since my name is Barbara.

CLAUDE: Your name is Barbara?

BARBARA: Yes.

CLAUDE: Then why did you tell me your name was Martha?

BARBARA: When did I do that?

CLAUDE: Yesterday, when we met.

BARBARA: I did no such thing. I told you my name was Barbara.

CLAUDE: I have an excellent memory. I don't see how I could possibly make a mistake like that. I was paying strict attention, as I always do when someone tells me their name. It comes in very useful, I find. In fact, I frequently write it down. (*Fumbles in pocket, produces old, crumpled paper*) Here, see?

BARBARA: (*Taking paper*) This says Pamela.

CLAUDE: Of course it does.

BARBARA: It doesn't say Martha.

CLAUDE: Why should it?

BARBARA: If, as you said, I told you my name was Martha yesterday and if, as you said, you wrote it down, why, instead of Martha, did you write down Pamela?

CLAUDE: This isn't what I wrote down yesterday. Having forgotten to take my pen with me, I didn't write anything down yesterday. This is what I wrote several years ago when I met a woman named (*looks at paper*) Pamela. I was just showing it to you as an example of the great pains I go to to remember a name.

BARBARA: Why don't you see if you have any other pieces of paper in your pocket that say Barbara, because that's my name and, even if it weren't, that is the name I told you was my name yesterday.

CLAUDE: Aha. And your name today is —

BARBARA: Still Barbara. Where on earth did you get Martha from?

CLAUDE: From you, I'm reasonably certain. Although what your motive would be in deceiving me, I cannot as yet figure out. Are you sure you are not mistaken?

BARBARA: I certainly know my own name.

CLAUDE: Yes, that seems likely. By now, even I know it, so I would assume you must. But are you sure that that is what you told me, that's my point. Could there have been, in those first disorienting and somewhat disquieting moments of our initial meeting, an instance of mental abstraction that caused you to have misjudged, in some crucial way, who you were?

BARBARA: Of course not. At our initial meeting I may have squeezed a bit too much lemon on my artichoke, and I vaguely remember some incident involving my salad fork, but to forget who I was — you are reaching, Claude.

CLAUDE: Not so much as you might think. At the age of eight, my mother, upon realizing she was planting red impatiens instead of pink, quickly dashed off a letter to *Frobisher and Hognew's Seed Catalogue* in an attempt to rectify the mistake, and in a moment of negligence born of the immediacy of her plight — for which I've long since forgiven her — she affixed one of my Orkney Island collector's stamps to the envelope. So disoriented was I when I discovered it missing, I repaired directly to the library and immersed myself in *Smiley's Geography* and was well into French Equatorial Africa before I realized I had read the self-same volume cover to cover not two days before. The letter, I might add, somehow found its way to Osaka.

BARBARA: What your mother was doing planting impatiens of any color at the age of eight I will not inquire into. But the point is: You didn't forget your name, or even more significantly, you didn't think your name was something other than what it was, did you?

CLAUDE: No.

BARBARA: Exactly. Even in the face of what must have been for you a terribly exacting trauma, you still remembered your name, as unmemorable a name as Claude is, I should add parenthetically.

CLAUDE: That is true.

BARBARA: Let me suggest an explanation that I think may clear this up.

CLAUDE: Please do, for, while I am not at all confused, I am more than a little curious to understand what has happened between us.

BARBARA: I suggest it was you, not I, who made the mistake. Having forgotten your pen, you were forced to depart from your usual, and in your case commendable, practice of writing down names as they are told you, and you found yourself forced to rely on your memory.

CLAUDE: Which is excellent.

BARBARA: Yes, or so it seemed as I was patiently listening to your painfully overly-detailed recounting of the Orkney Island Stamp incident. But then I thought: Why, if his memory is so "excellent", does he feel the need to write down the names of the people he meets? Fess up, Claude. You forgot more than your pen yesterday. You forgot my name.

CLAUDE: But surely you are saying I did more than that. You are saying that I not only forgot that you told me your name is Barbara — one instance of *lapsis memoriam* — but that in addition, my clear recall of your telling me your name is Martha is likewise wrong — constituting yet a second instance. Surely you would agree the chance of two such unprecedented aberrations occurring virtually simultaneously is astronomical.

BARBARA: I would agree. I embrace the opportunity to finally find something about which with you I can agree. And yet, here we are, Barbara and Claude, with some woman named Martha wedged between us, causing us to question and accuse one

another, when we could much more profitably be growing together, nurturing the spark of our initial meeting, as you so poignantly characterized it three or four comments back.

CLAUDE: I fear I cannot unreservedly devote myself to such an enterprise until we clear this business up. What is your last name?

BARBARA: Stewart.

CLAUDE: (*Considers it*) Hmm. No, that doesn't help.

BARBARA: Did you, perhaps, know some Martha at some time —

CLAUDE: I cannot help but note that you are proceeding as if it were accepted that it was me who was in the wrong.

BARBARA: "I" who was in the wrong. And I do accept it. I'm willing to accept it to enable us to move forward. Your recalcitrance in this regard is really quite vexing. Now, think back. Was there a Martha somewhere who —

CLAUDE: (*Miffed*) Of course there was a Martha somewhere. I daresay there were dozens, and that's not including those who may have similarly been hiding behind pseudonyms. But the only one I can think of is the one you brought up under the guise of introducing yourself to me yesterday.

BARBARA: I see this is fruitless. How disappointing. I was so looking forward to our little chat. Now —

CLAUDE: We're grown adults. I can't imagine being stymied by such a stupid misunderstanding. Is there no other solution?

BARBARA: Unless you are willing to admit your error, I can't see how we can begin to correct it.

CLAUDE: I couldn't. Not in good conscience. It is, at this point, for me a matter of principle. But for you I should think it would be a simple thing to own up to, say, having coquettishly indulged in a childish prank.

BARBARA: As simple as the day is long. I relish owning up to my indulgences, when it has a basis in fact. But this is pure prevarication, and to admit to it would put both me and, more importantly, my credibility in an untenably vulnerable position. I wish I could trust you not to take advantage of such vulnerability, but given your conduct over the last few minutes, I don't see how even you could expect such foolhardy largesse on my part.

CLAUDE: No. Of course not. As I said, I have my principles.

BARBARA: But perhaps I do see a way out. It is a daring notion, bordering on the reckless. But you seem to radiate more than sufficient panache to carry it off.

CLAUDE: I'm intrigued, particularly by these most recent perceptions of me.

BARBARA: Suppose — stay with me on this, it would be a wild adventure — but suppose we were to start over. From scratch. Introduce ourselves, one to the other, all over again.

CLAUDE: Oh, my. I would need a second to contemplate what that would entail. Are you suggesting, as I believe you are, that all that has gone on between us, from yesterday's misbegotten introductions until and including today's stimulating tête-à-tête will become a nullity, and we will once again be strangers?

BARBARA: Yes.

CLAUDE: It seems such a tragic waste.

BARBARA: And yet it brings with it the excitement of a first encounter, the mystery of the totally unknown. It seems a small price to pay.

CLAUDE: Small indeed. *(A beat, as he considers it)* Let the devil take the hindmost, I am ready if you are.

BARBARA: I am.

CLAUDE: Very well. *(Pause. They both turn away. Then turn back)* Madame allow me to introduce myself: Lyle Allsworthy.

BARBARA: Josephine Beauchamp. Don't I know you from someplace?

CLAUDE: I daresay it's possible. I cannot place your face, but your name...

— end of play —