

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I had a bad habit of rifling through Dad's things. On one Saturday morning I opened the bottom drawer of his desk and something caught my eye. Underneath a couple of old business books and newspaper articles was a manila folder. Little did I know that its contents would leave an indelible mark on my life. It was my birth certificate.

The date was accurate, July 23, 1967, but my name was listed as Kim Owens—Owens was my mother's maiden name—and my father was listed as Jesse Nance Jr.

But I was Kim Hardy, wasn't I? Hadn't I always been Kim Hardy?

I kept looking at the lettering. Could it be a mistake? Could I be hallucinating? No. The date was right. The hospital was right. The facts were there in black and white. Yet I couldn't wrap my mind around one fact: Erick Hardy was not my father. Jesse Nance Jr. was.

You'd think I'd have run to Mom and started screaming, "*Who the hell is Jesse Nance Jr.? Why didn't you tell me your husband*

isn't my father? Why y'all lying to me? When were you going to tell me?"

And yet, I didn't say a word. Not only did I not say a word then, I didn't mention it for another four years.

Because I had been going through my father's things, I knew how he'd play it. He'd chastise me for going through his things. He would turn my life-changing find into another example of my being a "dumb shit." I'd never hear the end of it.

I could have waited till Dad wasn't around and simply confronted my mom. But I didn't do that either. I didn't want to hurt her, and I knew bringing up this question would do just that. Besides, having this issue explode would undoubtedly add to the already bad vibes between my mother and the man I now knew was not my biological father.

I decided the only course of action was to take no action. The only solution was silence. Anything was better than dropping a bomb and watching what was left of our fragile domestic life go up in smoke.

Meanwhile my mind was a muddle. When we went for drives, I sat in the back of the car watching my father's hands on the steering wheel. I used to think my hands looked like his, but now I saw the difference. I remembered all those sweltering summers in West Palm Beach when someone would say, "You look just like your dad," or "You sound just like your dad," or "That's something your dad would do." I took those observations to heart, observations that, I now knew, were bullshit. I didn't, in fact, look or talk or walk or even think like my dad, because he wasn't my dad.

The realization that the story you've been told about yourself is a blatant lie is a hell of a thing to process. In fact, I didn't process it at all. I kept it buried inside and covered with shame, because, I reasoned rightly, the secrecy surrounding my birth was the result of shame. Someone—this Jesse Nance Jr., my Liz Owens—had done something too shameful to reveal.