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The Names

a novel

Florence Knapp

THE NAMES



Florence Knapp

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For my husband, Ian—with love

Prologue

October 1987

Cora's mother always used to say children were whipped up by the wind, that even the quiet ones would come in after playtime made wild by it. Cora feels it in herself now, that restlessness. Outside, gusts lever at the fir trees behind the house and burst down the side passage to hurl themselves at the gate. Inside, too, worries skitter and eddy. Because tomorrow—if morning comes, if the storm stops raging—Cora will register the name of her son. Or perhaps, and this is her real concern, she'll formalize who he will become.

Cora has never liked the name Gordon. The way it starts with a splintering sound that makes her think of cracked boiled sweets, and then ends with a thud like someone slamming down a sports bag. *Gordon*. But what disturbs her more is that she must now pour the goodness of her son into its mold, hoping he'll be strong enough to find his own shape within it. Because Gordon is a name passed down through the men in her husband's family, and it seems impossible it could be any other way. But this doesn't stop her arguing back and forth with herself, considering all the times she's felt a person's name might have influenced the course of their life. Amelia Earhart. The Lumière brothers. Only last week, she'd noticed a book on her husband's bedside table, *Clinical Neurology* by Lord Walter Russell Brain.

"Doesn't that strike you as odd?" she'd asked.

"Coincidence," Gordon had replied. "Although you wouldn't believe the number of urologists called Burns, Cox, and Ball. And, actually, Mr. Legg is pretty common in orthopedics."

Do you not see the risk? she'd wanted to say. *Do you not see that calling our son Gordon might mean he ends up like you?* But she couldn't. Because surely that was the point.

She rests the crook of a bent finger against the warmth of the baby's cheek as though his skin might transmit some vital message. Of what he wants. Of who he might be. But before anything can be divined, something crashes against the back wall of the house—a sound both heard and felt. She draws the baby closer as the security light flickers on outside, illuminating the roiling silhouettes of the firs. Vast and looming, then receding, before being made large again. She hears Gordon emerge from the next room and belt down the stairs, pictures him striding pajamaed across the dark of the living room toward the patio doors, then standing in the spotlight, squinting without his contact lenses, trying to determine what's out of place. She imagines him reduced by the looming threat of the trees, the immensity of the storm.

A few minutes later he opens the door to the nursery, and Cora feels a draft of cold air, as though it's attached itself to his clothing and followed him up the stairs. "It was just the watering can," he says. "Come back to bed now."

"Soon," she agrees. But she doesn't want to leave the baby alone and so she lets him sleep on, his head heavy against her arm as the sounds of the storm meter out the minutes of night unraveling into day.



GORDON IS ON the phone to a colleague already at the practice. Cora overhears them discussing the lack of warning in the previous night's weather report, then the possibility of canceled appointments and

staff not getting in. She makes breakfast one-handed, the baby preoccupying her other, as she helps Maia tune in to a local radio station to listen as names of schools closed by storm damage are read out. Maia's comes halfway down a roll call of unfamiliar primaries, eliciting a small, delighted smile and a silent thumbs-up, which falls to her side as her father enters the room.

Reaching for a slice of toast before he heads off, Gordon says, "My parents are coming on Sunday. Make sure you get to the registrar's today." Two statements, side by side, delivered as though one justifies the other. "And don't cut across the common," he adds. Flashers, murderers, and, today, trees that might still come down in the aftermath.



THE HOUSES ON their street are all stucco-pillared fake grandeur, front gardens composed of neat, low-lying shrubs, overlooked by identikit blank windows. When they step outside, there's little evidence of the storm. But beyond the cul-de-sac, the landscape has that same blinking unreality of emerging from a cinema in daylight. Trees lean at odd angles. Flattened fence panels leave gaping invitations into back gardens. A rotary washing line lies collapsed across the pavement. A few doors up, a man's shirt is caught on a privet hedge, pegs still pinched at its shoulders. Maia's eyes flit about, their town suddenly a spot-the-difference puzzle.

They walk along the edge of the common, steering the pram around fallen branches, stopping to look at an oak's vast, wormy rootball, dripping with clods of mud. Maia crouches in the hollow beneath. "Careful not to get your coat dirty," Cora says. *His words.* Her own instinct is to encourage Maia to lie down, to breathe in the rich, musky scent of the earth, to imagine herself as a fox cub curled up nose to tail. She's nine, on the cusp of being too old to want to do these things.

Maia clambers out and dusts off her coat. At the zebra crossing, where the amber globe of a Belisha beacon lies decapitated beside the road, they wait for the cars to stop. Maia looks toward the pram and says, "Why don't I have your name, if he'll have Dad's?"

Cora raises a hand to thank a driver. "Ah, but you do. It's just something no one else knows about," she says as they cross. "Maia means *mother*. I can show you in my book of baby names when we get home."

"Does it actually?" Cora is surprised at how happy this makes her daughter. "So why aren't we calling him something that just means *Dad*?"

Cora looks at the baby, whose full-moon face peeps out from his oversized snowsuit. She stops pushing for a moment and leans into his cocoon of talc-scented air. His eyes flutter with excitement on meeting hers, his swaddled limbs cycling frantically in celebration. He is not a Gordon. She blinks *I love you*, then straightens back up. "You know, I did actually look at which names mean *father* and the one I liked was Julian, which is *sky father*."

To Cora, it implies transcending a long line of troubled earth fathers, and for a while she'd wondered if it might be a name Gordon would compromise on. If it *means* father, if it's still a tribute to him, surely that's almost as good? But home early one evening, the book of names open face-down on the sofa, he'd picked it up, scanned the splayed pages for a moment. *Just the girls' names, remember, Cora. We have Gordon for a boy*. And when he'd snapped the book shut and placed it back on the shelf, the idea of a conversation was somehow put away too.

"I like Julian," Maia says.

"Me too. What would *you* call him though?" Cora asks. "If you could choose anything?"

"Well," she says, and Cora can tell by the way she stretches out the word that she's already thought about it. "It's not a very normal sort of name, but I like Bear."

"Bear?" Cora asks, smiling.

"Yes. It sounds all soft and cuddly and kind," Maia says, opening and closing her fingers as though she's scrunching sweetness in her hands. "But also, brave and strong."

Cora looks at the baby and imagines him being all those things. She wants that for him.

Closer to town, the clear-up has already begun. Two men with chainsaws cut fallen lime trees into transportable chunks, leaving only shorn stumps in the pavement's tree pits.

Maia gives a shy wave to a small blonde girl whose hello is lost to the noise of machinery. And once they've passed, she tells Cora, "That's Jasmine. From ballet."

"Oh, yes, the one with the older sister at—"

"Sadler Swells. But I have a question," Maia says, finding her way back to their conversation before Cora has a chance to correct her. She takes a breath, as though she's about to ask something forbidden, and then says, "Why does it matter? To Dad, I mean. The same-name thing."

Cora wants to say it matters because sometimes big men feel small inside. Because some people—like Gordon's father—travel through life believing themselves so far beyond improvement, they come to think their children, and their children's children, should all be made in their name. Because sometimes their need to please previous generations is greater than their need to love future ones. To Cora, it feels like a chest-beating, tribal thing. But she doesn't say any of this to Maia. She already picks up on enough. The morning after a disagreement, no matter how silently Cora has endured it, Maia will seek her out at the kitchen sink, wrap her narrow arms around her waist, and say, "My lovely mummy," her cheek resting against Cora's back. At those times, Cora feels the commiseration, the shared sadness. And once, the dampness on the fabric at the back of her dress where Maia's face had been moments earlier.

"Tradition is just important to some people," she says instead.

"Having your own name is too, though. Sometimes? Maybe even Dad would've liked having his own one."

Cora takes a hand off the pram to wrap her arm around Maia's shoulder. "Wise girl."

She wonders again if she is doing this right. Any of it, all of it. If it's even the right thing for Gordon himself to be carrying on this tradition. Maybe consenting to live in the shadow of his father and his father's father is only perpetuating the likeness, increasing the weight of it for him. Perhaps calling their child something different would be a liberation. Not at first, but later.

And Maia. Isn't she just teaching her daughter that keeping the peace is more important than doing what's right? Cora wonders what Maia thinks of her for agreeing to give her brother this name that will tie him to generations of domineering men. And it dawns on her that while Maia's name was originally intended as a silent bond between them, in revealing its meaning, that, too, may be a burden. Perhaps she has unwittingly sent a message that their lives are destined to follow the same path, when her real hope is for her children to tread their own.

1987



Bear



Cora watches as the letters form, each one emerging like some magical and extraordinary thing from the nib of the registrar's pen as it moves across the page. Bear Atkin. Bear. Just four letters, B-E-A-R, but each one feels charged, no longer just consonants and vowels. A great surge of—what is this thing?—joy, yes, that's it, joy—courses through Cora's being. A whole-body dizzying happiness. She glances at Maia, who stands beside her chair, and sees the surprise on her face.

As the registrar hands Cora the certificate, she tells her she's been doing this job for twenty-two years and has never had a Bear before. She cranes over the desk and looks into his pram. "But it's just perfect for you, isn't it?" And then to Maia, "You look like a very proud big sister. Take good care of this little Bear of yours, won't you?"

Outside the office, Maia is giddy. "I can't believe you chose my name—I just—I just never thought you'd call him *my* name!" Cora kisses her forehead and puts the envelope into her bag, as Maia wheels Bear onto the street.

At first, Cora feels as though she is floating above the paving and, catching sight of her reflection in a shop window, she's surprised to find she's a solid, grounded thing. Maia is a few steps ahead, but Cora hears her stream of chatter, observes her lovely back as she bends over the handle to bring her face closer to her brother's, and is elated. She knows this will be a defining moment in Maia's life, a moment when she was given a voice and wasn't asked to fit into the shadow of her parents' marriage. But then, before they've even reached the top of the hill, comes the knotty realization of what she's done. If Gordon were to discover the name was Maia's choice... She blinks and tries to push the thought away. He's never hurt Maia. But perhaps that's because Maia has been good and small and shown herself only in the places where Cora has sensed it won't put her in harm's way, always calling her back, sending her off for a bath, or to fetch some unneeded thing if she's felt her stepping too close to the fire.

Beneath Cora's autumn layers, her top begins to dampen. Her sanitary pad becomes a heavy wodge between her legs, while a cold sweat mottles her forehead and prickles at the back of her neck. It's as if every fluid part of her is attempting to escape her body. To make a run for it.

What has she done? How could she have been so stupid? And *Bear*. Without it being the choice of a nine-year-old—because he can never know that it was—how can she possibly explain this name? A name that will seem like she's chosen it to humiliate, to say that his family tradition, his father's approval, means so little, she didn't even confine her betrayal to something ordinary. Something like Julian, perhaps.

She thinks of repeating Maia's words, of telling him that a boy called Bear is someone who will be soft and cuddly but also brave and strong. But she knows he will find little value in these qualities. That they will only make him more furious. And *how* will she tell him? What possible time or place will soften this news? Catching him

in the right mood, cooking his favorite dinner, none of these things will help. And the goodwill he's shown toward her recently, through her pregnancy and the early weeks with the baby, when he's treated her with the professional consideration he extends to all new mothers in his practice...that won't withstand this. What was she thinking? She will have to change it. She'll have to go back to the registrar and apologize. It can't be too late; the ink is barely dry. She'll understand that it's the turbulence of the storm; of being awake all night after weeks of broken sleep. It's not a normal time. But as Maia reaches the zebra crossing, she turns, her face open in a way Cora has rarely seen, the tension that usually shapes her features momentarily lifted. "Mama—" And that name, she hasn't called her that for years, long since replaced by *Mum*. "Thank you, Mama. This is just one of the most special things that's ever happened to me."

Cora checks her watch as they walk along the edge of the common. There are five hours until Gordon comes in from work, which seems both an eternity and not nearly long enough. She must make some kind of plan. Cora has only just remembered Maia is meant to have swimming tonight and wonders if the sports center will be open. Mehri has taken her since the baby was born. Can she ask again, just one more week, if she'll be going anyway? Perhaps she could take Maia home for tea afterward too—their girls don't know one another that well, but they live nearby, are the same age; it can't be that much of an imposition, can it? If she can keep Maia out of the house until seven, that would give her half an hour between Gordon getting home from the practice and Maia arriving back.

When they get in, Cora parks the sleeping baby in the hallway, fixes Maia a snack, then makes the phone call. The pool is closed. But Mehri offers—Cora doesn't even have to ask—to have Maia over for tea with Fern instead. And for a moment this gives her some confidence, as though this small piece of the jigsaw fitting so neatly

into place is a sign that things might be okay. She goes into the bathroom and piles her damp clothes into the laundry basket, changes her underwear, and pulls a clean top from the drawer as she thinks through what to do with Bear. And despite her anxiety, she realizes she has thought of him as *Bear* effortlessly, as though this has always been his name. As though he's just been waiting to slip into it, and now only needs her to make it real—to break the news to Gordon—and this drives her on.

She wonders how she might keep Bear safe. Considers stringing out his milk, so that by six she can feed him into that state of slack-armed slumber where she can safely lower him into the Moses basket without him waking. But then what? She goes to the closet, starts to move shoeboxes from the floor, stacking them out of sight beside the chest of drawers. When the space is big enough, she swipes away dust with the side of her hand, then fetches the little bed and positions it in the cupboard to check it fits. She sees the madness in what she's doing. He wouldn't hurt their baby, would he? But because of Cora's moment of impetuosity, Bear's existence is now a personal affront to Gordon and his family. She can almost hear his voice. *My son? Bear? Have you lost your mind?* No, she thinks, as she moves things into place around the basket, she must keep him safe.

She runs a finger down the narrow gap between the closed doors but can't judge how much air it might let in, so she opens them again, steps into the Moses basket, and shuts herself inside the closet. There is a line of vertical light, and when she puts her eye to it, she sees a slice of bedroom. She stands, sinking into the darkness, observing this sliver of her own life from a new angle. The bed she shares with Gordon, its floral duvet cover a wedding gift chosen by his parents. Twin nightstands. Just a clock on her side. A lamp, a notepad, a stack of books on his. She realizes there is nothing of her own self impressed on this space, no trace of her

physical presence. Really, there is only the *feeling* of her hanging over the stillness of the room.

She hears the muffled sound of Bear beginning to stir in his pram, but before she's opened the closet doors, she hears Maia go to him, her voice soothing, cajoling him from crying out. Cora imagines her unzipping his snowsuit and carefully lifting his warm body out, and when she can no longer hear them, she decides Maia must have taken him through to the living room. Cora stays a while longer in the cupboard, feeling as though she has temporarily stepped out of her own life and pressed pause.



AT SIX-THIRTY, CORA hears Gordon's key in the lock. She thinks she may be sick. She moves through to the hallway, where he greets her, kisses her cheek, and hands her his suit jacket. She brushes her fingers across the warm grain of the fabric before hanging it up, wanting to slow everything down, to feel these tangible things, to savor the moments when she can choose where to focus her mind.

She follows him through to the kitchen and, unable to continue holding the tension she's been carrying all day, hears herself blurting out, "Gordon, I've done something."

He turns then, leans back against the countertop, not taking his eyes from her, and she knows he won't ask, will not help to draw it from her. He loosens his tie, not dropping his gaze. And when she speaks, she hears herself as he will: pathetic, weak.

"I went to register the birth like you asked, and I—I hope you won't mind, but I've called him something else. Not Gordon. You know I've never really wanted to call him that and I—I—"

She stops because he hasn't blinked; his eyes haven't left her face. And this part, it's like someone with a fear of heights, someone at the top of a ladder, so sure they're about to fall, they have the impulse to jump and get it over with. It takes all her strength not to

sink to his feet and let him kick her, to not even try to escape its inevitability, but to submit, because this anticipation only delays what she knows is coming. But then she thinks of Bear up in the bedroom closet, and Maia eating dinner in Mehri's kitchen, and straightens: "I've called him Bear."

He smiles and she sees his demeanor shift, sees him shake his head, reach for a drink. She realizes he doesn't believe her. "No," she says, "no, it's the truth." And she takes out the envelope from where it's hidden between two cookbooks. He turns then, one hand still on the water filter as he surveys the certificate. He spends longer than he needs to, staring, and her hand begins to shake as she continues to hold out the paper for him, its audible wackering filling the seconds as they tick by. He looks up and, holding her gaze, lets the jug drop, hard, so that it smashes against the kitchen tiles. She feels water soak into her socks and knows she should have thought to put on shoes.

He reaches out, grabs a clump of hair near the crown of her head and pulls it backward, his face just inches above hers. For a moment she's confused, thinks he may be about to kiss her, but instead he hurls her head against the side of the refrigerator.

Even though she'd promised herself she wouldn't, she cries out in shock, then quickly closes her mouth, not wanting to risk waking Bear. She must not drag his presence into Gordon's thoughts.

"You're my wife," he hisses. "I asked you to do one thing for me"—her head slams against the fridge once more—"and you couldn't do it. Just one"—*thud*—"damn"—*thud*—"thing."

Some part of her realizes he's only just beginning; that there are only so many times she will feel the flux of brain, skull, and flesh against metal before she does not. And so she overrides her wish not to disturb Bear, and does something she's never done before: she screams for help. Not just once, but over and over, knowing the small window in the pantry is open, that the door is ajar, that it will be impossible for someone in the cul-de-sac not to hear. When he

covers her mouth, she clamps her teeth down hard on the side of his hand, sinking into flesh and wiry hairs. He recoils, surprised. But it's only a moment's relief, because now there are a few feet between them and she realizes he will use this as a run-up, that he's about to charge.

She springs sideways and feels the midwife's careful stitches pop. But there is no pain, just a rush of adrenaline, as he chases her through to the living room. He grasps her hair again, but she jerks away and is freed, a prickle of white heat at her scalp.

He lunges, pulls her to the ground, and although she hasn't heard the shatter of glass or the front door open, someone—who?—is in the room with them. It is the man from two doors down, who only moved in a few months ago; the man she sometimes sees walking his dog back from the park on the afternoons when she's set out to meet Maia at the halfway point from school, the man who has smiled at her pregnant belly and who one day said something about it being *nice weather for ducks*, as they sloshed past one another. This man, he is pulling Gordon from her, and for a moment it feels as though this is an end, of sorts, that whatever happens next will be a de-escalation. But then Gordon is shouting, "What the hell are you doing in my house?" as the man's dog yaps at his ankles, its trailing lead caught up around the legs of the coffee table. The man puts up his hands, as if to say, *I don't want any trouble, I don't want to fight*, as Gordon places flat palms firmly against his chest and then pushes with such force, Cora can only watch as the man falls backward, smashing through the glazing of the patio doors.



LATER, AND NOT necessarily in this order, a police officer—young, maybe not even twenty-two—will dial the digits of Mehri's number that he finds written out by the phone and arrange for Maia to stay overnight. Then, he will go upstairs and retrieve Bear from the

closet, and Cora will wonder how he knows to jig the baby just so and to pat his back until his cries ebb into occasional shuddering sighs. But she won't think to ask, because the words have disappeared from her head; the path between thought and voice temporarily broken. She will keep a hand over her right ear, trying to silence the ringing inside her head, not comprehending why it's there or that it has anything to do with the scene in the kitchen just forty-five minutes earlier. She will notice when the flashing blue lights slide from the living-room walls as the ambulance outside pulls away. She will watch as an older police officer cuffs Gordon's hands behind his back and, although she cannot hear the man's words, she will understand he is a patient, that there is something in his manner that tells her he is uncomfortable to be cast in this role, leading away the man who perhaps officiated his own mother's death; diagnosed his wife's depression; said, *Don't worry, I've seen it all before*, as he felt the man's enlarged prostate. Because Gordon is a man well-liked by his patients. He is a good doctor, no matter what his surgeon father thinks of general practice. Cora will nod and point to the back of the chair as the young police officer gathers up her things, slipping his hand into the front of her bag to check her keys are there. He will leave the room momentarily to lead through a second set of paramedics when he hears them in the hall. And they will smile and treat her with such tender kindness that she feels it's this—of all things—that may break her. She watches the medic's lips, can't decipher the words, but senses their warmth, notices how she keeps her eyes on Cora's own, not returning the anxious glances of her more junior colleague. All these people, so many of them young, dragged into the horror of their evening, into the messiness of their lives, which have been unfolding year by year, month by month, week by week, day by day, hour by hour, to bring them to this moment.