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Sister George and What's in a Name

By Ernest Hebert

I don't remember the year, but let's say it's 1987 when my brother Tony at age 44 and I at age 46 are headed for St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, to visit our aunt, Sister George. She's come down from Canada on some kind of Catholic Church business, and my mother, who has been in touch with her older sibling by telephone, says that Sister George is eager to see us.

She's a bit of a stranger to us. We haven't seen her in decades and even when we were kids living in our parents' house on 19 Oak Street in Keene, New Hampshire, we saw her only on occasion in the brief time she was stationed at a parish relatively nearby in Nashua. What I remember most clearly about her is that she's tiny, even tinier than our mother. I also remember a cheerful smile, a shy demeanor, and that we never had a real conversation with her because we spoke different languages.

Tony and I meet Sister George at St. A's in a room that looks like a chapel retrofitted into a space that my parents would refer to as a parlor. In a time when some nuns, including my cousin Anne, a Sister of Mercy with a Ph.D. in education, are wearing civvies, Sister George is still in her full regalia black habit, gold cross hanging from a pendant around her neck.

As we enter, she looks very nervous but full of anticipation for our meeting. Her right hand holds the crucifix that falls from the pendant to the middle of her chest. Such a tiny lady with such an exquisite face full of mirth. We hug her with care. She's so delicately constructed that I'm afraid I'll crush her. After our hellos and her *bonjour* we step back and there's an awkward moment.

Finally, Sister George speaks her first words in English, a bit of slang she must have picked up during her visit at St. A's and that she planned to show off at just the right moment. With a sweeping gesture of a hand toward the chairs, she says, "Park your ass."

Our meeting with Sister George was brief. Nothing changed. We could not connect with her in our language, and she could not connect to us in hers.

A few years after my brother Tony and I visited her, Sister George retired to the Motherhouse in Quebec. My mother didn't think she was getting good health care, so she worked the phones trying to help her sister. It wasn't until after Sister George had died that my mother learned that the funeral mass had already been carried out and the body buried. Where is her grave? Somewhere in Canada. I don't know the exact location.

Now in 2019 my aunt's order, The Sisters of Joan of Arc, has faded into obscurity. Here's a direct quote I picked up, dated August 2017, from Catholic Answers Forum: "The Sisters of St. Joan of Arc, who are based in Quebec, closed all of their convents due to age, and have just one [convent] in Canada. Their charisma was to minister in rectories. Their motherhouse was sold to a developer who turned the building into condos."

I had never heard that word "charisma" used in that context before, so I looked it up. Secondary meaning: "a divinely conferred power or talent."

What of that phrase "minister to rectories?" What does that mean? It means they were cooks and maids at the residences of priests. I've heard people refer to such work as "demeaning," but in my family's ethic, which I have adopted, there was no such a thing as demeaning work. There was only work and the pride you took in doing it as well as you could, or the shame you felt if you slacked off. The idea of work as a charisma--"a divinely conferred power or talent"--is probably the single most important concept I learned growing up Catholic. It brought me through a number of jobs, from age sixteen to age 31 when I landed my first middle-class position: sports reporter for *The Keene Sentinel* newspaper. Before that I worked as a store clerk, telephone equipment installer, janitor, gas pumper, enlisted man in Uncle Sam's army, mill worker, hospital laundry man, landscape laborer, and my favorite charisma, taxi driver.

My mother died in 1994 at the age of 85. I was surprised when I came across her death certificate. I'd always known my mother as Jeannette Vaccarest Hebert. The death certificate listed her first name as E-l-o-d-i-e. I pronounce that name the way it's spelled in English, Elodee. Maybe there's another way

to say it. How did my mother say it? I don't know, because I never heard her voice the name.

I learned another of my mother's secrets when she was in old age. She often talked about her childhood where she cared for her father who was disabled by a stroke. It was among her duties to eat meals with him. Because of brain damage, he would eat from her plate, and she would eat from his. She recalled that one day she and her friends found him sitting on the ground several blocks from their tenement house in Manchester. They took him home in a child's little red wagons. My grandmother supported the family working in a shoe shop.

In her teen years my mother liked acting in plays, and she talked about attending nursing school at Notre Dame Hospital in Manchester at age 23. One day the math came alive in my mind, and I said, "You never talk about the five years between high school graduation and nursing school. What were you doing during those years?"

She shrugged and said, "I was in the convent."

She belonged to the same order as St. George, The Sisters of Joan of Arc. She couldn't bring herself to take those final vows in her sixth year, not because of a crisis of faith--she remained a devout Catholic all her life--but because she wanted a family.

When she married my dad, Elphege Hebert, she was 31. He was 28. They were both virgins. They met at an estate in Dublin, New Hampshire, owned by a branch of the famous Cabot clan. My mother was what we call today a nanny for the Cabot children. I don't think she would have liked that word "nanny." She was proud to be a Registered Nurse.

My dad was born in Keene on Wood Street. Nearby are Wagner Street, Cobb Street, Speaker Street, and Hooper Street. There are no Ruth and Gehrig Streets. Keene was never a New York Yankees town, but it was a Yankee town. We French, Irish, Italian, Polish, German, and Lithuanian Catholics were outnumbered by the Protestants. Keene might be a Yankee town of English speakers, but in the Hebert household of my parents' on both sides, French was the favored language. As far as I know my father was never touchy about his unusual name, Elphege. In his world it was as ordinary as Tom, Dick, and Harry.

The Hebert name in my genealogy goes all over the place,

because my dad's mother was also a Hebert. My father had fond memories of his maternal grandfather, Alcide Hebert, who was a carpenter and landlord for a couple of properties in Keene, though he was born in Canada. My father's mother, whose name I cannot tell you, died giving birth to my Aunt Theresa when my dad was thirteen. My grandfather, Arthur Hebert, remarried a Yankee woman, which was how she was referred to in the family--a Yankee woman--and of course she didn't speak French, so the language in the household transitioned to English.

My mother was raised on the West Side in Manchester where you could live a lifetime and never have to speak English. When my parents started dating they found two things in common. Neither was a drinker, and they both grew up as Franco-Americans. My mother retaught my father the French that he had lost when his mother died and his father remarried. French became the language of my parents' romance, so that was the language that was spoken in the home when their first child was born, me.

When I started Kindergarten in Keene at age 5 I spoke fluent French and only a few words of English. I don't remember this, but my parents told me that my experience with language in Kindergarten--where I was the only French speaker--was so bad that they decided to speak only English in my presence. The result: I never again spoke French. In fact by the time I started first grade a year later at St. Joseph's Elementary School, I had, through some mental alchemy that to this day I do not understand, killed almost everything I knew of the French language. Even when I studied it in high school and later in college, I just could not learn it. All I remember today is common expletives, intensifiers, soft-swears--I dunno what to call these expressions. I have no idea how to spell the words, so I write them in this essay in phonetic English: Ih moh ta dzee, la tete de pyuhsh, la clot de shee-yeh. And I can count to twelve ... that's it--that's all that remains of the language of my early childhood.

I know that some people grow up nimble with multiple languages, but I ain't one of them. I had enough problems as a kid figuring out one language that even today at times boggles my mind. And yet that experience of dumping a language and replacing it with another seems to have helped make a writer out of me. For one thing I was never able to pull out of my head clichéd usage in English--I had to invent my own phrases. Also, early on I paid attention to the way people spoke. I went out of my way to avoid talking like my relatives who spoke English with

a French-Canadian accent. I didn't want to talk with a Yankee accent either, or an Irish brogue, or any kind of accent. I wanted to talk like John Cameron Swayze. You have to be of an age to recognize that name. He read the news on the Camel News Caravan, sponsored by Camel Cigarettes. "I'd walk a mile for a camel." And, in case you didn't know, "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette."

In school I was an average student with little interest in subjects taught by the Sisters of Mercy at St. Joe's--especially religion, which from the very beginning of the Baltimore Catechism--who made us, God made us, why did God make us, to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world, and to be with him in the next--all struck me as guess work and boring boring boring. Who in his right mind would want to spend all eternity in adoration of a supreme being, and why would this supreme being want my company? I had these questions as a kid, and they still nettle me.

Nor did the reading assignments thrill me. Is there any literature more dreary and stylistically listless than the activities of Dick and Jane in the lower grades? And why would any seventh grader thrill to read *The Courtship of Miles Standish* and other texts written in 19th century verse forms? I didn't discover my passion for reading in school, but on my own at the Keene Public Library, beginning with *The Swiss Family Robinson*. However, there was one area of study at St. Joseph Elementary School that lit me up, English grammar, in particular diagramming sentences. In fact grammar was the only topic in school that I was ever good at and that I made a point to learn. I didn't know it at the time, but I was teaching myself the fundamentals that every skilled writer has to know. When I started writing at age twenty-three as a freshman in college, I went from being a non-writer to a passably good writer very quickly (I published the second short story I ever wrote in a national magazine), because (I think) I had already internalized the geometry of the English language. Thank you, Sisters of Mercy.

My brother Tony's name is actually Omer, O-m-e-r, and T-on-y is short for his middle name, Antoine. He's always hated the name Omer. And he was not so crazy about Antoine. Unless you wanted an argument you called him Tony or Anthony, who was my mother's favorite saint.

We had a little shrine in the kitchen of our house on 19 Oak Street in Keene that had its origin as a cuckoo clock. The

cuckoo guts had been removed so that the face was open. Sometimes I wish somebody would remove the cuckoo parts of me. Then again maybe without the cuckoo there would be no me. Maybe cuckoo is as close a gift from the divine that I'll ever possess. Inside my mother's emptied cuckoo clock was a plaster cast of St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost objects. My mother admitted she had lost something of great value and prayed to St. Anthony for its return, but she wouldn't say what it was. And I never pushed her on it. In our family there were more topics you didn't talk about than ones you did. The idea was to keep the peace. It worked. I've never had a falling out with any family member.

For example, I never told my devout mother that even as a child I never had faith in the Catholic God, nor in any God. Let me make a distinction here. I am not an atheist--I'm not smart enough to be an atheist. Maybe there is a God. All I know for sure is that even if he exists I don't have faith in him. My feeling is that if there's a God he's a don't-give-shit-about-people God. Maybe religious faith comes from a gene; some people have it and some people don't. I don't have it.

In the months before she died my mom was bed-ridden in a nursing home with compression fractures in her spine from osteoporosis and untreatable and painful rheumatoid arthritis, which is one reason that I suspect that if there's a God, he's a don't-give-shit-about-people God. My mother's mind remained nimble to the end, but not her body. When she was 82, her body already starting to fail her, she read Robert Perreault's novel *L'Héritage*. She was so moved by that book, written in French by a Manchester, NH, guy, that she translated it into English, in longhand, for her grandchildren. She wrote two drafts, one literal and another in vernacular English to capture the spirit of the French. Quite a feat for any translator, let alone one with no training.

I was very close to my mother; in some ways I was a momma's boy. I often went to her when I needed advice. The best thing she did for me was accept my future wife Medora Lavoie; she embraced her like the daughter she never had. Medora grew up in Dover, New Hampshire, as a Lavoie or is it Lav-wah--I've heard the name spoken both ways. I speak it both ways myself, and so does Medora. Depends on the occasion. The mood. The company.

I was the executor of my mother's will and in the days after her death I handled everything with great competence. I never broke down. Almost a year later somebody sent me a review

of one of my books. The reviewer, Jack Barnes, a Maine writer, happened to mention that Franco-American boys were often close to their mothers. When I read those words I broke down and wept. Took me a year to recognize my own grief.

I've been a professional writer for most of my adult life, as a newspaper journalist, novelist, and teacher of creative writing but the single piece of writing that means the most to me is a poem. I would like to read it to you. It's called:

My Mother's Donuts

On your deathbed
you told me the stems
of the flowers I picked for you
when I was a boy
were too short to put in a vase.
I didn't have the heart
to tell you, you said.
I remembered the smell of the sun
on my clothes that you hung
on the line on a hot summer day.
And in the winter the smell of the air
from the clothes
steaming off the radiators.
You remembered how happy you were
with a new electric dryer.
I remembered you made donuts, I said,
the aroma, the heavenly taste
when the donut
is still hot from the boiling oil.
By the time they cooled
the taste was ordinary.
In those days people didn't tie
their dogs, you said.
Oh, yeah, I remember now,
They came from miles around
drawn by the smell of your donuts.
You always made the mistake
of throwing them the holes.
I couldn't help myself.
I laughed--you were too weak to laugh.
And in the spring
when dad burned the dead grasses,
do you remember that smell?
And the color of the new grass
growing through the black burn scar

after the rain, the brightest green
of the new season?
There's no waiting for an answer;
you've shut your eyes.
I go back in time,
see myself picking flowers,
a boy's pure love for his mother,
so brief.

Tony and I are both named after priests. I'm named after my mother's older brother by fourteen years and the leader of our family, the Right Reverend Joseph Ernest Vaccarest. Everybody referred to Father Vaccarest as Father Vac, even after he was promoted to monsignor. His lifetime ambition was to become the first bishop of French-Canadian ancestry in the Diocese of Manchester.

Father Vac, who by the way as a young priest likely married Grace Metalious's parents in Manchester, was deeply involved in a power struggle between the Irish Catholic and French Catholic Church hierarchies in New Hampshire. The subject matter of their disagreements was the curriculum in Catholic schools.

I'd like to digress for a moment: interesting, isn't it, the identity-language people used in those days and those of us in my generation still. You had people calling themselves French who had never been to France, and you had people calling themselves Irish who had never been to Ireland. Ditto Poland, Italy, and so forth.

The Irish had a strategy for assimilation: deal with the Yankee bosses in their own Americanized English language while at the same time cherishing, sometimes inflating, and always flaunting their Irish culture. In the dispute among New Hampshire Catholics over schools the Irish position came down to English-only taught in Catholic Schools, like the school I went to. Among the French clergy and intellectuals the French language all by itself was the culture. So the Franco priests wanted Catholic schools to teach French as well as English and to preach in French from the pulpit.

According to my mother, Father Vac favored a middle course between the two sides, though just what that course was never explained to me when I was a child. Or maybe I just forgot or

wasn't paying attention. I do remember that Father Vac's motto was: you can't live one foot in Canada and one foot in the U.S. But he contradicted himself when he said over and over again that French was his favored language. Anyway the issue became irrelevant when Father Vac died suddenly of a heart attack at age 61 in January of 1956. I was fourteen when Father Vac was found by a housekeeper nun of the order of St. Joan of Arc keeled over at his kneeler in his bedroom. Father Vac was my first mentor, and also served as as my father figure when my dad was in the Navy during World War II. Father Vac's death was the single most traumatic event of my teen years.

Father Vac wasn't like any priest I know of today. He never talked to me as if I were a child. He was the only adult who actually conversed with me. He was a hunter and fisherman with a huge gun collection. Tony and I used to play with his guns in the basement of the rectory at St. Edmund's parish in the Pinardville village of Manchester. He hid the ammo. Father Vac taught me the rudiments of boxing and, more important, infused me with a combative attitude that served me well growing up on the East side in Keene.

Father Vac's given name was Joseph Ernest Vaccarest. My given name is Joseph Ernest Vaccarest Hebert, a fact I never knew until I happened to stumble across my birth certificate when I was in my twenties. I asked my mother, "Where did that 'Joseph' come from?" She told me that in her family the first-born son was always named Joseph, but he would be given another name to go by in public to prevent a confusion of too many Joes. Later I learned that the tradition in Canada was that all the sons were named Joseph and the daughters were named Marie. Maybe so but in my family I'm the only Joseph among three sons.

I find the idea of naming your alpha males after St. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father kind of funny. Here's a guy way down on the priority list of the Church and also, apparently, of the one true God: a beta male, a caregiver, a caretaker, a good provider, a perfect model of a working man in the Yankee mills who never complained, but also never got to have his say, and, from the accounts I learned growing up, never had sex with his blessed virgin wife.

As for my last name, I grew up a Hee-bert. Medora and I have spent the last six winters in New Orleans, where we're Ay-bares. I'm proud to have the Ay-bare name. I mentioned at the beginning of this essay that 1967 was a fateful year for me. It was

fateful because 1967 was the first time I experienced pride in my name when lived in New Orleans for seven months working the 11 pm to 7 am shift as an attendant at DePaul Psychiatric Hospital in New Orleans. I was hired in part because Beth Greene, the head nurse, liked my name. I heard the phrase more than once, "Ay-bare, that's a fine South Louisiana name." Nobody in my part of New Hampshire said "Hebert, that's a fine New England name."

Couple years ago a good friend gave me a tee-shirt celebrating a river with my name in Nova Scotia in the Grand Pre region where my people come from and where the river's name today is pronounced Heh-bert, the River Heh-bert. On my grounds, the Monadnock Region of New Hampshire, I'm a Hee-bit, as in "Ehnie Hee-bit, he's a writah." I've been a Hee-bert or a Hee-bit far too long in Yankee land to make changes. It's kinda sweet though to hear the name spoken the way it feels right, even if I have to travel 2,000 thousand miles to New Orleans. Let me add that my youngest daughter, who grew up in New Hampshire as Nikki Hebert, now resides in Brooklyn, New York, where she's known as Nicole Ay-bear.

I would like to hear your thoughts and stories on the subject of the pronunciation of your names.

My brother Tony, the second born in our household of three boys, was named Omer after a legendary priest on my father's side of the family. But he was long dead when my brother was born, and as far as Omer was concerned he was stuck with an old fashion French-Canadian name he could not abide that his schoolmates made fun of. When my parents' third son was born, they named him Paul, a name a boy can use anywhere without self-consciousness. My mom used to call him pitsy pois, little pea.

Sister George remains a vivid presence in my memory house, though I never really learned much about her. Like so many of my friends with French-Canadian roots in Keene, I threw off the French language. Sister George reversed the language issue. Though Sister George was a native-born American, she never learned more than a few words in English--"park your ass." For me Sister George is the embodiment of perhaps my greatest regret in life now that I'm pushing age 80, which was running away from my heritage. Father Vac's death when I was a teenager disturbed me for years--poor grades in school, bloody fists fights,

feelings of disassociation from the world I was growing up in. To this day a grief hangs over me, but I now believe that my loss, which I had always thought was in the figure of a person, Father Vac, is only part a greater loss. Call it a confusion of tongues that I've been trying to define with this essay.

Which leads me to an irony in the Vaccarest name. My great-grandfather, who I know as Giovanni Vacarressi, migrated to Nova Scotia from Laspezia, Italy, and eventually ended up in Quebec where his Italian name was given an -e-s-t ending and pronounced Va-cah-yess. But as my mother recalled growing up as Jeannette Vacaless in French Manchester, she was often reminded that Va-cah-yess was not a real French name.

When Giovanni's son, Jean Baptiste, came to the states his Frenchified Italian name was anglicized to Vaccarest. Father Vaccarest was quoted in an interview that the Vaccarest name was a misspelling of Vaccaressi. However, when I told my story to an Italian woman she informed me that Vaccressi is not an Italian name. It's likely that the document I saw with Giovanni's last name and that Father Vaccarest believed was the correct spelling was itself misspelled. So then Va-cah-yess is not French and Vaccaressi is not Italian. However, Vaccarest is thoroughly at home here in the states where foreign names are routinely discombobulated and recombobulated to fit the American tongue.

I shut my eyes and I see my warrior-priest uncle, Father Vac. I see my earthly father, Elphege Hebert, a man with only seven years of education who worked forty-five years in a cotton mill, and who I never really knew until he lived his last years in my house. I see brother Tony who, by the way, now likes to be called Antoine. So, I count that as progress. I see my fictional character Howard Elman, a foundling who, like his creator, did not know nor claimed to care about his past, who eventually learned in *Spoonwood*, book six of the Darby novels, that his name was actually Latour and his roots in North America came from old Acadia. In my books Howard Elman flips off the Latour name, but his son Frederick adopts the name, so his son Birch is not an Elman. Birch Latour and his wife Tess will start a new family dynasty with the Latour name. As one who did not get his consciousness raised about his heritage until middle age, that's the best I've done in my fiction to set things right.

One winter day when I was about twelve or thirteen we had a sudden thaw and a heavy rain that flooded the Church and school parking lot, which also served as our playground. That night temperatures plunged and the next morning the water had frozen solid. I had a nice view of the frozen parking lot from my classroom upstairs.

I watched as two nuns in their black, flowing gowns and giant white bibs left the convent and started toward the ice. One nun appeared to be limping. As they came closer to my eye I identified the limping nun as Sister Gregory, who had been my sixth grade teacher and a favorite of mine.

The other sister gave Sister Gregory a push. Suddenly, she shot forward, spun, twirled, moved with dazzling speed. I thought for a moment that she would rise into the sky on the wind. Sister Gregory was on ice skates.

She navigated the entire "rink" with incredible grace. Something came over me that I did not understand, but that was overwhelming and beautiful. The feeling was too good. We Catholics weren't supposed to feel this kind of elation in the earthly realm. I resolved not to tell anybody about it, afraid that somehow I had sinned with this new feeling. You see, even though I didn't believe in the Baltimore Catechism God I did believe in sin. It wasn't until years later that I realized that the feeling I had experienced was the feeling of falling in love.

Jump ahead two decades at a time when I was writing a piece about Sister Gregory for *The Boston Globe* op-ed page. Sister Gregory was in her eighties and had retired only a year earlier. She was living in a nice little apartment in Portsmouth, NH. She was full of vitality with a somewhat sardonic outlook on the world that of course I would not have noticed when I was a boy.

"Why of course I could skate--I'm from Burln'," she said, pronouncing the Berlin the New Hampshire way. Here's the part relevant to my story today. She made a strong point that the sisterhood had been the right choice for her. She had only one quarrel with the Church, the name that was given to her. "My name is not Gregory," she said with emphasis. "It's Isabelle."

It was on the drive home from that interview when I had a sudden image in my mind of my aunt, Sister George, the sweet little face, her black nun's habit, the pendant around her neck with the cross clutched in her hand. I suddenly realized that I didn't even know Sister George's given name.

Thanks to some research by my good friend Robert Perreault of Manchester I now know my aunt's name. It was Marie (hyphen) Anne, that's Ann with an "e."