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What's in a Name?

by Garf Collins

I didn't know I had an unusual name when I was a small boy. At primary school I never thought about it as nobody seems to think it odd. They just called me Garf. As this was inner London perhaps the assumption was I was called Garth, said with a London accent. I actually became quite proud of my name when I was about eight. We visited Beryl, my father's cousin in Cornwall. On her sideboard was a photo of a serious looking man in RAF uniform. I was told this was Beryl's husband who was a Squadron Leader called Garfield Collins and I had been named after him.

It was great to be named after such a hero I thought. I loved his garage, which housed strange tools and electrical and mechanical devices I couldn't name. My favourite thing was the pre-war car, blocked up, but still with its lovely smell of leather and oil. It had an air of patient waiting for its absent owner. I was told my namesake would be away for some time. What I couldn't work out, though, was the way Beryl kept looking at me and crying.

My relaxed attitude to my unusual name changed suddenly in the long holiday before going to grammar school. I suddenly thought that on the first day I would be sitting in the classroom and the teacher would ask us in turn what our first names were. It certainly dampened my enthusiasm for 'grown-up' school.

On the first morning we sat in silent rows. The nightmare became reality;

"Campbell. First name?"

"David Sir."

"Collins. First name?"

"Garfield Sir."

The master looked up over his spectacles, “Your mother didn’t do you any favours did she.” General laughter.

I consoled myself by finding namesakes who were famous; Garfield Todd the liberal minded leader of Rhodesia, Garfield Weston a millionaire and later Garfield Sobers - one of the best cricketers who had ever lived. I was also delighted to find there had been a U.S. President Garfield, until I found out he had been assassinated.

Later, in business, I came to think of my name as an asset. I thought when I sent letters to potential customers they might remember me better than plain John Smith, for example.

But then it all changed again. Some friends in Australia sent me a pack of ‘Garfield’ cards. Apparently, Australian papers were syndicating an American cartoon series about some cat. Then the animal came to the UK and, sadly, whenever I introduced myself the standard response was, “Oh! Just like the cat.” I wouldn’t have minded so much if it wasn’t such a pathetically unfunny cartoon.

“Anyway,” I said to my parents as I bemoaned that eponymous feline, “at least I was named after a war hero. Was he one of the war aces who shot down many enemy aircraft. What happened to him?”

“Sorry. Didn’t we tell you? The war got all too much for him. He committed suicide.”