

Lily Hoang

Renaming

It was Maggie's idea, their renaming. "It would be like a whole new identity," she'd said. "We can be anyone we want to be."

Joan thought the idea was stupid. She said as much, "I think the idea is stupid."

Joan knew it was another one of Maggie's identity crises, which she has every handful of months. It's what happens when you don't belong.

But like everything else that her girlfriend wanted, it was impossible to say no.

And so here they are: Maggie's motorcycle name is Grunt, which Joan thinks is twice as stupid as the idea, but whenever they ride, she calls her "Grunt." Joan goes with something a little more subtle: Rhiannon, after the Fleetwood Mac song. This makes Maggie hate Stevie Nicks even more than she did before. "Sissy," she'd say. "Stevie Nicks is the sissiest of that bunch of sissies."

The motorcycle was also Maggie's idea, another idea that Joan thought was stupid. But here they are, the proud owner of a brand new Harley-Davidson, with two new names every time they ride. This is the way life goes sometimes. Especially if you don't know how to be firm with your own girlfriend.

It's not that Joan's never had a girlfriend before that makes her soft. She's been this way her entire life with anyone she likes enough to call a friend. She doesn't look like the kind of woman who would be soft – in fact, everything about her is gruff, from her rag-tag homeless-boy-living-on-19th-century-European-streets hair to her refusal to wear anything but denim and leather to her stocky build – but alas, looks are looks, and Joan's anything but gruff when it comes to sad eyes and potential tears.

And this is the way she's always been. Back in middle school, her best friend in the entire world was Tara, and this other girl Olive – she was such a bully – made her cry because Tara got new Guess jeans and that made Olive jealous. Joan didn't care about brand names. Joan couldn't afford to care about brand names, but Tara and Olive could, which made brand names important to them, important like Guess or Girbaud or Z. Cavaricci or Polo or Levi's. She knows what brands are cool, but only because Tara can't stop talking about them. In Joan's tree house, Tara would open her Jansport backpack and a magazine would appear, and she'd point to Joan and say "This is this" and "That is that" and "Oh look what she's wearing, I'm going to ask my mom for *that* this Christmas," and sure as anything, first day back from Christmas break, Tara would be wearing the exact outfit she pointed to in the magazine, and Joan would remember, because that's the kind of girl Joan is: sensitive.

And it's her sensitivity that made her go up to Olive, the most popular girl in school with skinny legs and a pallid smile, and punch twice, first at her pretty face – left eye, right hook – and then in her non-existent gut. Even in middle school, Joan was stocky. She had power in her. Lucky for her, none of this happened at school. It happened at the mall, Lakeside Mall, and so she wasn't suspended or anything. No, what happened was way worse: she became the most hated girl in school for randomly punching the sweetest as saccharine girl their school had ever known. No one asked her why she did it. They just wanted someone to hate. And so she was hated, for most of seventh grade, but then on a lark, she decided to try out for the football team – not "on a lark" at all, her drunk of a father made her, something about his failed dreams and she may as well have a dick her being such a lesbo bitch or something like that – and made it: the first girl ever, and varsity too. She wasn't some

sissy position either. She was a running back, and a damn fine one at that. She was the one who took their team to the state championship, and it was the quarterback – surprise, surprise, Olive’s boyfriend – who mucked it all up with a pathetic throw, with them in the lead by three, which was impossible for anyone on their team, much less Joan, to catch, which was intercepted, which led to the other team scoring a touchdown. With that kind of disappointment, they couldn’t even convert their next plays to a field goal. They were deflated. But that day in the mall, Joan didn’t know any of this would happen. All she knew was that her best friend was crying because some meanie-pants made her cry and she hated it when Tara cried and so she walked right up to Olive, which she had never done before, and looked her right in the face and said, “Stop picking on my friend,” and Olive said, “Or what?” and it felt just like a movie and she said, “Just stop it, ok?” but Olive wouldn’t back down, no she started laughing at her with her mean witch cackle that all the boys thought was sugar and Joan couldn’t take it, she just couldn’t, and she punched her twice, the one to the face wasn’t even that hard but the one to the belly was, and Olive was on the ground moaning and Tara and Joan took off running like wild horses. By the time they were at the asphalt parking lot, they were holding hands, not in a romantic way, just in that way that girls do sometimes when they’re best friends forever.

The next year, Tara would become best friends forever with Olive and call Joan a dyke for playing on the football team. She’d call her a dyke because they held hands, more than once, and because Joan had kissed her in her tree house, more than once, and mostly because Tara had let her and probably liked it. Tara became a cheerleader, like Olive, and Joan would watch them cackle from the sidelines when she made the big plays. They’d cheer for her, but she knew it wasn’t for her. It really wasn’t for her at all.

Girlhood was hard for Joan. Mostly because she wanted to be liked, desperately, and girls can smell desperation in any flavor. And maybe that’s why she’s such a pushover.

Grunt and Rhiannon are sitting in an overpriced Italian restaurant. They both wear leather chaps over their jeans. Despite her name choice, Grunt has on a light cotton floral print button down, contrasted boldly with a black studded leather jacket. Her straight long dirt hair is crumpled on top because of the helmet – “helmet hair,”

Rhiannon likes to joke – tangled along the bottom because of the wind – “wind hair,” Grunt likes to joke back. Rhiannon is wearing a denim button up and a matching leather jacket.

They don't come here often, but in a town like this, there aren't that many options, so all major holidays, including anniversaries, are celebrated here, at this overpriced stuffy place. It's their eight year anniversary, just two years shy of a decade. To celebrate, a carafe of house red, dinner, and a motorcycle ride.

They're holding hands and smitten, and even though the whole town knows about them – lesbians are nothing new – they still make an extra effort to be public in their affections, lest the townspeople know how unhappy they are and start the gossip train, lest the tourists think they're just friends.

They live in a tourist town, Truth or Consequences, a stupid name. And yet, it was the name that brought Joan there in the first place. Eight years ago, freshly out of grad school, Joan had no job and no job prospects. She decided to take her car on an adventure: she'd live wherever the car broke down. She took random roads anywhere away from her parents house – a two-story giant in a po-dunk Illinois town – and ended up here, Truth or Consequences, a place known for two things and two things only: their natural hot springs and the fact that the town renamed itself for some radio quiz show back in the fifties. Joan liked the idea of hot springs, and even though her car didn't break down here, not technically at least, she met Maggie here, at a hostel, and decided this was the place she'd live. Or, until she and Maggie split.

Eight years later, they're sitting in a restaurant celebrating an anniversary. Rhiannon never thought it could be easy like this.

“Look at them,” Grunt says, shooting Rhiannon out of her reverie.

Grunt nods at a couple sitting two tables over at a diagonal. They're clearly tourists: they have that fresh out of a hot spring look to them. They can barely sit up, and they drink water like it's pure gold.

“They're sweet,” Rhiannon responds.

“Sweet? Seriously?”

“Yeah, sweet.”

They look sweet. The woman wears a bright orange coat and pink translucent glasses. Her black hair is knotted and greasy. The man has on a silver jacket. His eyes are tired. They lean into each other when speaking. They look like a young couple in love.

“They’re pathetically tourist. Don’t you think people should make *some* effort to fit in?”

They look like tourists. They look like they belong in a city. They’re not dressed for small town New Mexico. They belong in Chicago or Houston, maybe Phoenix, anywhere but Truth or Consequences.

“Come on, it’s sweet. I bet they think it’s weird that everyone says ‘Hello’ here.”

Grunt and Rhiannon laugh, but it’s not vicious. That’s how Joan started their first conversation eight years ago. Maggie was soaking in a communal bath. She was there with a group of girls from college. She was an English major, wanted to be a writer, like Virginia Woolf. Joan eased herself into the bath next to her. “Do you think it’s weird that everyone says ‘Good morning’ to you around here?” And they commiserated over feeling too welcome in this small New Mexico town, full of ruddy-skinned friendly people and kitsch stores. Now, they own a kitsch store. They sell T or C t-shirts with funny quips about whether you chose “truth” or “consequence.” They silk-screen everything themselves. They design too. Joan went to grad school for art, undergrad too, and Maggie quit school to live in T or C with Joan, after just a weekend together.

“I bet you dinner on Saturday that they come into the store tomorrow and buy at least a hundred bucks worth of tourist junk.” Grunt is feisty. She’s not usually a betting woman, except when she put all her money on Joan eight years back.

They don't shake on it. They kiss. They kiss and no one in the restaurant turns and stares, except the tourist couple, but they're not staring because it's weird or wrong. They're just looking in that general direction, exhausted from sitting in the hot springs for too long. Their eyes are glazed and bright, like they've finally been sated after a lifetime of wanting something. This is the same look Joan had the first time she saw Maggie, her hair a lumpy mess in a bun on the top of her head, her glasses steamed from the water, and her smile, well, her smile never changes, it's always some cross between cross and radiant.

After dinner, they go on a two hour ride to Silver, a little city southwest of T or C on the edge of the Gila National Forest. It's the beautiful night. Grunt drives and Rhiannon clasps her hands tight around her girlfriend's waist. She tries to nuzzle into her neck for warmth but there are helmets in the way. There's always something in the way these days: eight years, she guesses that's to be expected, bound to happen at some point, Rhiannon just hadn't thought it would be so soon. They're supposed to be at the height of desire, thirty-somethings, and this is the closest she's gotten in months: helmet nuzzling.

It's late by the time they get to Silver City. The town has turned out most of its lights, nothing but traffic illuminates, a few reflectors along the roads to make sure late night drivers don't crash and cause unsightly messes. They turn around to go back to T or C before they reach downtown. Rhiannon was hoping they'd spend the night there, but she didn't say anything beforehand, giving Grunt the opportunity to do something romantic for their anniversary, for once, to take the initiative. But before they reach the downtown district, with any number of pleasant little hamlet bed and breakfasts or even a sterile but luxurious Hilton, Grunt turns back. She points them east, back home, another two hours on a cold and stupid motorcycle, another night between cold sheets and a useless blanket.

Twenty miles outside of Silver, Rhiannon shakes Grunt's right shoulder. They can't hear each other. Rhiannon is clearly trying to communicate, but nothing can reach her girlfriend's ears, not with the wind and the helmet and their velocity through space. Rhiannon screams, "I want out," and Grunt doesn't hear, can't hear, won't.

Two hours later, they're back at their three bedroom adobe house. It's red and ruddy, like everything in New Mexico, like their skin has become from years of enduring the sun. Joan disengages her body from Maggie's, pulls the helmet free of her head and shuffles her hair, the little of it on her head. "I was being serious."

"Huh?"

"I said, I was being serious earlier. You know, back when you ignored me?"

"I don't know what you're even talking about."

The stars are ridiculous out here, bright and so close they might be in Texas rather than light years away. The moon, it's no different, its radiance makes Joan's skin warm, even though she knows it's impossible. Here, there is only sky and its many wonders and dirt. No grass. That was the hardest thing about moving here. No grass anywhere, almost no green, save for the cactus and occasional weed. And the oleanders and their affronting green.

"On the bike. I said I don't think this is working."

"What isn't working?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, Rhiannon, I don't. What do you mean?"

"Stop calling me that, ok? You thought getting a bike was going to fix everything, and that didn't work, you didn't even give it a chance to work and so you had to come up with these stupid names, I like my name. I don't need a new one."

"It was starting over, Joannie. We were starting over."

Maggie walks over to Joan and makes to slide her hand down her pants, but they're too tight and the chaps are in the way and the leather jacket's in the way and what could've been an attempt at something sexy comes across as cruel. Like Maggie was mocking Joan for gaining weight over the last eight years.

As usual, they have English muffins for breakfast. Maggie takes her toasted with butter and strawberry jam. Joan takes hers with peanut butter, untoasted. They share a pot of coffee, in two mugs. Eight years ago, they bought gourmet. Now, Folger's. Eight years ago, Joan would've made fresh biscuits. Now, the generic brand from the grocery store. And they have so much more money now than they did back then.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Hm."

"Should we go to work today?"

"What? Is it a holiday or something?"

Maggie adds skim milk to her coffee and drinks it in one gulp. It's hot. It burns her tongue, but she does it anyway. Joan sips at hers slowly, blowing on it three or four times before bringing the porcelain to her lips. She knows Maggie must be suffering, her burnt mouth at least.

"No, it's just... after yesterday, I thought maybe we should stay home and talk."

"Talk? Talk? Mags, I have nothing else to say."

On their way to the shop – The Consequence of Truth – they don't talk. But they walk alongside one another. Maggie tries to start a conversation here and there – "Don't you think those mountains look like white elephants?" – but Joan won't engage, not even with the friendly Hemingway nod. She keeps a steady pace, and even if they were lolling about, it couldn't take them more than ten minutes to get to the shop. At least the torture won't last long, one or the other thinks to herself.

Joan unlocks the door and Maggie clicks on the neon "Open" sign. Joan puts out the till and Maggie goes into the back to brew another pot of coffee, also Folger's. It's become their preferred brand, though neither of them really likes it.

It's nine in the morning, and despite their unhappiness with each other, they both smile politely. They don't talk. Joan goes around the stop, straightening t-shirts on their hangers, and Maggie re-configures their kitsch displays: Navajo blankets and wooden recorders with spirit animals carved into the spine. She puts in a few dream catchers and dream jars, for color. Maggie hates silence, so she wanders to the back and flicks the knob on the radio to NPR. Terry Gross poorly interviews some writer turned filmmaker. They stumble through the interview, and Joan – moving hangers an eighth of an inch this way and then back – feels sorry for everyone involved, including herself. The hangers are perfectly spaced apart from one another. The shirts are symmetrical. It looks like they might be hanging in The Gap, not some tourist trap store in the middle of nowhere.

Their friend Adam drops by ten minutes after opening. He always does. People in T or C don't have many other things to do, so they make their rounds. When he opens the door, a little chime sounds. It is more like a whistle, an interpellation to anyone who is willing to be called forth.

“What's the word, ladies? How was your big night? Full of romance and intrigue?”

Joan slaps all her effort and three shirts fall off their plastic hangers. This isn't The Gap. This is their tiny little store that hardly ekes out a profit, and they can only call it a profit because at the end of the fiscal year, they make more than rent and utilities, which are practically free in a place like this. “Yeah, it was just fucking magical as they come.”

“Jesus, there's no need for violence. Peace, Joan, let's make peace.”

Adam's always saying shit like that. He doesn't belong in the twenty-first century. He should've offed himself during the seventies, when it was clear his cause – and anyone else's – was lost. He wears what he wears every day, a tie-dye t-shirt with a large purple peace sign in the middle, old jeans and sandals. His grey hair is stringy and too long. He uses a matching purple scrunchie to restrain it, another sign of his being decades behind the times.

But Joan doesn't feel like making peace. Nothing is right. "Hey Maggie, I'm not feeling so good. I'm heading home for a nap."

Adam intercedes, "Is it me? I can go."

"No," Maggie says, "she's probably gonna bleed soon, that's all."

"Don't be such a bitch."

"Ok, ok, I get it. I'm going, ladies, please, no fighting. I'll be over at Happy Belly if you want me." And Adam, ever the peace-maker, leaves, rather than help them make peace. As he walks out, the chime goes off again, this time it feels more like a sigh, at least to Joan.

"Please, Joannie, stop it."

"This isn't my fault."

"So it's my fault? Why is everything my fault?"

"Wait, so it's *my* fault that you're incompetent in every way? It's my fault that you can't run a fucking business and it's my fault that you can't buy the right goddamn coffee, like ever, and it's my fucking fault that you're a shitty girlfriend, right? Right?"

Maggie doesn't say anything. Her fingers flutter around the edges of a woven blanket. It's cream based, with unrepentant turquoise and ruby triangles. She grabs the fray and shakes the blanket from its creases. Carefully, she folds it up again. The shop has been open for exactly thirty minutes. Terry Gross asks another inane question. The author turned filmmaker responds with surprising fluidity. Looks like he knew about this question in advance.

"Whatever, Joan. Do whatever you want."

Joan goes to the backroom and grabs a box of t-shirts. They are cerulean. Maggie picked out the color, said it reminded her of the Rio Grande, of water and re-birth. Joan rolled her eyes but they went with the color in the end so it didn't matter

how she responded. In the end, it would always be the same way: Joan would bend to whatever Maggie wanted. Nothing ever changes. She's been that kind of sissy since forever. Back since before Tara and before Olive and she must've been this way as a baby, that's how ingrained it is in her. She's never broken up with anyone, last night was the most she's ever mustered, and Maggie didn't even take her seriously. That was apparent – *is* apparent – and Joan hates her for it. She hates her for knowing that they'll never split, unless Maggie wants it, which she probably does, it's just that they bought the store together and they bought the house together and they bought the fucking motorcycle together and they came up with those ridiculous names together. Joan starts laughing. "I can't believe you chose the name Grunt. Of all the names in the whole fucking world, Grunt." Her laughter is large and happy in a way that Maggie hasn't recognized since they first got together.

"Joannie, let's go away."

Their last vacation was to the big city: El Paso, Texas. And it was a pathetic vacation. They stayed overnight in a Motel 6 that didn't even have a working air conditioner. It was summer, two years back, and hot. The paint in the bathtub stuck to their feet, and the towels were so bleached they barely bent and didn't soak the water from their skin. And they only went to go to the outlet malls. Rather than the romantic meals Joan wanted but didn't explicitly request, they had fast food and chain pizza delivery when they were too tired to leave the motel.

"I'm listening." Joan is still laughing but it's slowed into long chuckles that last for decades. She's reverted back to her teenage self. Her face is unweighted, and her long fingers periodically jolt up to cover her mouth.

"What about Iowa? I've never been!"

"Iowa?" Joan stops laughing. This is serious.

"Yeah, Des Moines. Or Iowa City."

"We haven't gone on a vacation in years and you pick Iowa." She starts laughing again, and it's buoyant. She's having fun.

“What’s so wrong with Iowa?”

“Mags, it’s January. Do you know what Iowa’s like in January?”

“Come on, it’ll be romantic, tons of snow, we’ll be buried in like snow bunnies.”

Even Maggie’s face has softened.

“We’re the antithesis of snow bunny material.”

“Let’s do it. Come on, please, Joannie. We deserve a vacation.”

“Yeah, absolutely, we deserve a vacation, but why not Paris or St. Petersburg? Why not Prague or fucking New Zealand? I bet you haven’t been to any of *those* places either. Why should we go to the worst state in the all the United States? I mean, for fuck’s sake, let’s go to Montreal or even Monterrey. Anywhere but Iowa.”

“You were born in Iowa.”

“What is with you people from the reservations? Do you think every state is the same? I was born in Illinois!” Joan is joking, making light emanate from what was the unending winter of their frigid relationship, but she knows – as soon as she said it – that she went too far. She knows that one wrong sentence and now she’s going to be the one apologizing. She’s the asshole. She’s always the asshole in their relationship. Every single time. “I’m sorry, Mags, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Des Moines it is then.” Maggie the champion goes to the back and returns with two mugs of coffee. She’s fixed them the way they both prefer. She’s knows things like this: how her girlfriend likes her coffee. She thinks it’s sweet. “To Des Moines!”

The girlfriends lift their mugs to toast.

Softly, Joan says, “What if we had a baby?”

Joan hears Maggie swallow the coffee. Joan hears Maggie swallow another three times. Terry Gross is still talking.

“I mean it. You can’t avoid this forever, Mags, you know I want a baby.”

“Last night you wanted to split with me.” Her voice is quiet. The radio is louder than her. The writer turned filmmaker booms about this or that, something about the intricacies of building a set, which is so different than creating a world in writing. A set is real. It’s tangible. Place in the novel is entirely ephemeral. That’s the world he uses: ephemeral.

“It’s been eight years, Mags, and I haven’t asked for much. You fuck up and I forgive you. You fuck me over and I forgive you. All these years, I’ve stayed because you promised me a baby.”

Terry Gross contemplates what the writer turned filmmaker has said. She is meditating on place in film versus the novel.

Joan says, “Remember? The very first night we met, you told me that we’d get married and have a family, just any other couple, all I had to do was stay.”

“No, I don’t remember. I don’t remember that at all.”

“So you don’t want to have a family with me.”

“It’s not —”

“That’s what we’re missing. Have a baby with me, and I’ll stay. Just like I promised eight years ago.” Joan is pleading in whispers. The whole shop is still.

“We did. And it didn’t work.”

Maggie doesn’t need to remind Joan about that, but she does. She does because Joan doesn’t seem to remember how hard that was for them. Joan is stubborn and impossible.

“It did! It worked. It just didn’t last.”

“Yeah, Joan, that’s one way of saying it.”

The theme music to “Fresh Air” bounds throughout the shop, filling it false joy, like hope could be that simple.

Outside, the young couple from the restaurant is walking along the sidewalk. The woman has her small hand hooked into the man’s elbow. “Look!” Joan cries. “They’re coming!”

Their door whistles and the couple enters. The woman is still wearing her orange coat, the man his silver jacket. They are so clearly happy that both women resent them immediately.

The woman walks up to the blankets.

“Those are authentic,” Maggie says. Her voice is dry, not unlike all the dirt and desert around her.

“Authentic?” the woman responds.

“Like woven by real Navajo. My cousin made it. My girlfriend and I go to the reservation every couple weeks to get this stuff. It’s legit.”

“Oh.”

Maggie relies on tourist guilt. She knows how to manipulate their bourgeois culpability.

“What do you think?” the woman asks the man. “Maybe for you mom? For her birthday?”

“Yeah, I think she’d like that.”

“Or maybe for your grandma. She’s always knitting us stuff. We should give her something back. Something craftsy.” The woman blooms a smile. She takes off her orange coat, and Joan sees a little bump at her belly.

“Oh, are you expecting? With that coat on, you look so tiny!” Maggie glares at Joan for being so obvious and pathetic.

The woman is gentle though. Her fulsome smile, so generous. The man puts his hand at the base of her spine, a comfort, and says, “Our first. It seemed so impossible for a while, but now...” He trails off as if musing on how dreaming can become real.

“Do you know? Is it a boy or a girl?” Joan can’t help herself.

The woman says, “We’re waiting.”

“But how will you decide on a name!?”

The man’s eyes are crystal. Up close, Joan can tell they aren’t really as tourist as they’d thought the night before. They both have little wrinkles that reveal the sun’s close breath. He says, “We’re thinking of something gender neutral.” He pauses. “I don’t know why I said that.”

The woman bounces, “Oh, he’s just being silly. We haven’t really talked about it. I mean, we named out cats after famous writers, and we joke about names all the time but we’ve got seven months to decide. That’s plenty of time.”

Maggie wanted to stay out of this baby talk, but she can’t help it. She says, “You should let it rename itself when it gets old enough. Names are important, and I don’t know, maybe it shouldn’t be the parents’ choice.” She’s proud of herself. She’s legitimized her motorcycle name to complete strangers, who nothing about her circumstance or about how her relationship is on the brink of being extinguished. “You know, my given name Kai. It means willow tree, but look at me: what’s willow tree about me?”

Except she’s wrong. She’s tall and long and her hair whisps at its edge.

Maggie goes on, “So in middle school, I started going by Maggie. I think it’s a beautiful name.”

Joan coughs, “And assimilation white.”

The couple moves through the merchandise uncomfortably. They've made their customers uncomfortable.

But Maggie doesn't relent. "And just a couple months ago, we got a motorcycle, and I demanded that we give ourselves motorcycle names. Because we should have that flexibility: to change. Don't you think?"

The man says, "Actually, believe it or not, it's something we've talked about."

And all four of them laugh like they're old friends.

The couple ends up buying two blankets and four shirts – for their friends – and a few dream catchers. They spend well over a hundred dollars.

Joan owes Maggie dinner next Saturday, which they will not have in Des Moines, Iowa, but it's the sentiment that matters. It's the sentiment that moves them past stagnation, forward and together: Joan and Maggie, Rhiannon and Grunt.

Author Bio

Lily Hoang is the author of four books. Her short novel *Changing* received a PEN Beyond Margins Award. Lily's choose-your-own adventure novel *The Old Cat Lady* is forthcoming with 1913 Press, and her anthology *The Force of What's Possible: Writers on the Avant-Garde and Accessibility* is due out in 2014 with Night Boat Books. Lily Hoang is an interim Editor-in-Chief at *Puerto del Sol* and teaches in the MFA program at New Mexico State University.

Citation: Hoang, L. 2013. 'Renaming'. *Polari Journal*, 8 (October 2013), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Hoang-Renaming.pdf (accessed <insert date>).