What’s in a Name?

BY ELLEN UMANSKY

Years ago, when I first moved to New York, my name got changed. I was setting up phone service for my new apartment, and the woman on the other end ran through a series of questions: Call waiting? Call forwarding? How do you want to be listed? My answers: Yes, no, and by my first initial.

A week later, a thick packet from Verizon landed in my mailbox. It was addressed to “E,” no first name, no last — only that letter sitting alone above my street name and number.

For several years, until I moved in with my boyfriend, “E” I remained — on my calling card, in the phone book, on all Verizon correspondence. I liked the way it looked on its own. My “E” felt full of possibility, like putting on a bright shade of lipstick, like slipping into a slinky dress. Maybe this signaled the new me.

I think of this story now, as I turn to my then-boyfriend, now husband, and say, “Maybe I’ll change my name. Take yours instead.”

“If you want,” he says. Blessedly, he doesn’t mention that I’ve brought it up enough times over the course of our five-year marriage to become something of a joke. “I would love it, but really, it’s up to you.”

At the time of our wedding, the time you’d think I would have answered this question once and for all, I never seriously considered taking his name. It wasn’t who I was. I liked my name, liked that it was different from his. A name struck me as the most incidental of connections. Why would we ever need to share one?

And now — well, now things have changed. Now there are three of us. We have a daughter — a wondrous little girl — who at 17 months is just now saying her first name. I suspect she will not care much that her last name differs from her mother’s. I’m the one who feels a twinge when we receive invitations addressed to the three of us or see our names listed in our building’s directory — the awkwardness of having my husband’s and daughter’s names linked while mine remains alone.

The myriad solutions that others have alighted on never felt right. Would you hyphenate Umansky?

I decided long ago that I would retain my name professionally, so in many ways, changing it feels slightly ridiculous, a grand, hollow gesture. Perhaps it comes down to this: Five years ago, I worried about preserving my own identity. Now it feels equally important to carve out a collective identity for the three of us, my family.

The last time I brought it up, my husband, daughter and I were walking on a nearly empty beach, on a glorious fall day. It was blissful, and I found myself thinking, with a nervous jab of excitement, Would this be the time I truly decided?

I took my husband’s hand. “You’d change it legally?” he asked.

I nodded.

He smiled, and then his face clouded over. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just — it’ll be a lot of paperwork.”

I looked at him, and I felt just the tiniest bit relieved. And that, for the moment, was reason enough to leave things the way they were.

Ellen Umansky, ’91, has published fiction and nonfiction in numerous publications, including the New York Times, Salon and the short-story anthology The Lost Tribe. She lives in Brooklyn and is at work on a novel.