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Trying On New Names: My Childhood Adventures Visiting Hertha, The Numerologist



As I was embracing the ABCs in kindergarten, my mom was leaning hard into being New Age. My parents were divorced “because the spark was gone” but living in the same house to raise us. This was the seventies, way before “conscious uncoupling.” So it was messy and weird and everyone was wearing technicolor mumus and sporting hideous perms.

No one would ever say my mom lacks commitment, so as she was crafting the “brand-new” her, a different name was required, obviously. She changed her name from Jane to Zorah as people do—wait, people absolutely never do that. In fact I’ve never met another Zorah (ending with an “h” for numerological balance) in my life and my sons’ have friends named Zahara and Canyon. The thing is when everyone in your group of friends does something, it normalizes the behavior. So if everyone you know is going to a numerologist named Hertha and changing their name, maybe you’ve lost your perspective.

During this time of my life, when most of my friends’ biggest decisions was whether they hated black licorice Jelly Bellies (I adored those underdogs) or maybe which *Little House on the Prairie* book was their favorite (or so I’ve been told, I hated them all) I was taken on a visit to Hertha’s house. The decision at hand, what to change my name to? All the names that were presented to me felt like they were created by an alien name generator:

1. Zerena?
2. Helice??
3. Roquine???

I wondered if these names came with a matching caftan or homemade tofu. I’d already met a girl named Rainbow through my mom’s new circle of friends. She was sweet, in a spacey way, and claimed to genuinely like carob. I wasn’t certain this was a club I wanted to join.

I asked, “Do you have any more normal kind of names?”

Hertha played coy, “What do you mean?”

“You know, names I’ve heard before.” Or that anyone has heard before. Anyone at all.

She consulted her numbers and came back with Leah and Heather.

“Yes, yes, yes, I have heard these names and do not hate them.” I thought, while I mulled over these two names that I had absolutely no interest in having. What’s true is this: I didn’t love my name. Everyone spelled it wrong and they still do, to this day, many of them right after they HAVE JUST SEEN IT SPELLED.

Sample email:

“Please let me know if your child will bring anything for the potluck. Warmly, Alyson”

Sample Response:

“Allison—Chandra will bring cupcakes. Thanks!”

No, no, no, no, no. It’s Alyson. I don’t say anything, cause how is that supposed to work?

“Thanks for bringing cupcakes. My name is spelled A-L-Y-S-O-N like the actress who played Willow on Buffy, thanks a bunch!”

Undoubtedly, their email response would read. “I loved Buffy! Sorry, Allyson, won’t happen again.”

Ugh. So that was annoying and the little jerks calling me Alice in Wonderland didn’t help because her name is Alice with an I and mine is A-L-Y-S-O-N with a Y, yes, I’m sensing a trend too, I see it now.

So let’s get back to Hertha. The only reason I was open to this whole adventure was because I had a secret agenda. I wholeheartedly wanted to change my name to Samantha. That was the witch’s name on *Bewitched*, and I totally wanted to be a witch. And while I know that’s a real stretch for most human kids, my mom already had a strong Esmeralda (Samantha’s mom) vibe going on with the flowing clothes, the bad hair and the popping up and sticking her nose into my business at the most inopportune times. Also, she read Tarot cards and was one hundred percent certain we were both psychic, so admit it, witch wasn’t SUCH a stretch.

Also, my imaginary friend’s name was Samantha and I loved her. I wanted to be her. No one called her a spoiled brat or the other “b” word, in fact no one believed she existed. She could get away with murder, or a lesser crime, scot free. I wanted a piece of that.

But when I requested Samantha as my new name, Hertha put the smack down on that quicker than you can say, “Sorry, that name is too normal.”

“Names that end in A are weak, unless they are grounded by an H. S is weak. We could try Zamanthan. Or Hamantha. Those are possibilities.”

Zamanthan? Hamantha? I was a tough, little girl who considered herself up to any challenge, but I mean, come on, Zamanthan? Or Hamantha? I didn’t come out and say a clear “HELLNO!” But I did revisit Leah and Heather without hesitation.

And so we made our way through the buffet of crap names and opted for a serving of the least bizarre offering on the menu. The potential new me, Leah H. Yesters. Hertha wasn’t happy with it. I wasn’t happy with it. And at that point in my life that was pretty much how I understood compromise. No one gets what they want and everyone leaves miserable.

I never did change my name. I got out of Hertha’s house with some malarkey about needing to think or meditate on it and once I was out of there, I never looked back. My mom asked me a few more times about my name, thinking it might give me a new start, which seemed odd at six but I didn’t raise a fuss. I bided my time and waited for some other shiny New Age object to catch her attention and something did, it might have been runes.

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Published by Alyson Shelton

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