

skylar smith

Phillip Brown

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Ian J. Profile

Smith is the name my family has carried for generations. It encapsulates our heritage and our history. However, it encapsulates a lot more people than even the largest turnout at any of our family reunions. Have you ever looked around a room, having sworn someone was just calling out your name, to find out just how similar your name sounds to another? My sister, anyone on my dad's side of the family, and I have, especially times when we're being addressed by our last name. The name being beckoned wasn't just similar though; it was the same. One of many Smiths in any class, list, roster, even at our high school graduations. Twenty-plus Smiths often surround us with absolutely no blood relation. My sister is 21, standing at about five-foot-six inches. She was born in New Jersey but raised in Georgia. She's a third-year student at Kennesaw State University. Those things she's sure of. But when "Ian Smith" has been called out in a room, she's looked around, expecting someone else to respond.

Ian Jeannette Smith was the name proudly scrawled on her birth certificate. According to our mother, it means, "gift from God," so it was only fitting for her firstborn. She insisted on "Ian J." starting around 2nd grade. Now, she reckons the period she placed delicately after "J", may have more closely resembled a lowercase "O". This gave way to modifications over the years like Ian Jo, Jo-jo, J-J, and even Josephina. Nicknames like these she felt fond of. They warranted her eager attention. However, Ian or Ian Smith simply, "doesn't do *it* for (her)."

Growing up it was annoying being toward the end of the alphabet and always being last. I can relate to this frustration to this day. Pestering questions from peers asking if she was related to the other Smiths in the class were beyond bothersome. In 4th grade, when she heard Smith was the most common last name in the world, she was, “disgusted.” While many adolescent girls fantasize about their wedding days, Ian may have fantasized more about changing her last *immediately* after. She thought she’d have to wait for the altar until she saw a *Friends* episode in middle school that planted the idea of legally changing her name sooner. That idea only grew with time. A random girl in her first class, freshman year who started calling her “Ian J. Fox”, unknowingly had Ian’s same intention in mind. They weren’t necessarily friends, but it lingered in her head, resonating more than Smith ever had.

Ian began thinking hard about a name change. How difficult would it be? What would she change it to? Would she be betraying our family? She knew her sisters, myself included, didn’t want children. We have no first cousins to help her woes. There was no one else to carry on Smith if she didn’t. From the moment my sister first casually mentioned her intention to change her name, this was a prospect I carefully considered too. I was slightly shocked but far from shattered. Smith has been passed down and around for so long that I couldn’t find the origin if I tried. No DNA test or *Ancestry.com* subscription could suffice. Would I be *the last* Smith? No chance! So, she was decided. She’d legally change her last name on her 18th birthday.

Then, 18 came, and she still wasn’t sure what her last name should be. She wasn’t just going to change it without purpose. She wanted a unique name that meant something to her. A name that *felt* right. My sister is a writer, so she explored name websites for writing characters.

Her friends began testing different names out on her, rooting for their favorites, as she delved into the nitty-gritty of the technicalities a name change would involve. It was more complicated than she had anticipated. Applications, notarized documents, fees, judges, court dates, a dreaded trip to the DMV, and she'd even have to secure a newspaper name change advertisement that'd run her name for 6 weeks. On top of it all, she was traveling internationally, which hindered her ability to change her name without facing significant passport and visa complications. So, she was still stuck with Smith.

What does Smith emulate to her? It's warmth, family, connection. Smith is silly and loud. She associates it with the side of our family that hosts big family reunions and vacations. Neither of us knew the historical context of the name or much beyond our personal experiences with it, so, to her, it means nothing. "Warmth, family, and connection," are overwhelmed by this nothing. "It's intensely bland... it's so common it could describe anyone," she says. It's not the name of the kind of performer or writer she aspires to be. It's not meant for magazines or billboards. Smith has no power.

I was most interested to know her *why*? The popularity of our last name could be annoying at times, but I never found it unbearable. I agreed with her sentiments about it being a "filler name", no more original than John Doe. However, despite my grievances, I never considered changing it (aside from marriage). Was it primarily a career move, branding herself? Was she seeking something more memorable, fit for a true creative? While she used to think that way, she doesn't anymore. Above all, she felt disconnected from the name. As far back as elementary school, Ian J. has known Smith is boring and she's far from that.

She wouldn't be the only one with a different last name in our family. Our oldest sister is soon to be married and, coincidentally, our mother never shared our name even though she's married to my father. Instead, she opted to keep her maiden name, the one she received her doctorate degree and had all her medical licenses under. This used to bother my sister, but she's come to respect it. "Dad didn't get the degree," she remarks. Her name may change to her future husbands, or it may be hyphenated, or they may merge together – it's too soon to decide. People have had multiple marriages and name changes for generations, even people in our family have before, so it wouldn't be the end of the world.

How she'll tell our family is another problem entirely. She's imagined a dramatic reveal over Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner. While the swap isn't necessarily a secret, it's not particularly predictable either. It's yet to come up spontaneously. "No one will ask because no one knows," she says, "It won't be easy, it won't be fun, but once it's done what are they gonna do?" She assumes it would be easier to wait until the change is finalized to announce it. This would prevent anyone's attempts to dissuade her. She'll tell our parents first— our mom will probably think it's ridiculous and our dad won't be happy. It's likely he'll be defensive which I can understand. Perhaps even I'd be devastated if I looked up to all my sister's choices a great deal. We're very different people and it would not be the first time our decisions diverged. Many thoughts emerge when I consider how I feel about it, but above all, I admire her bravery. Ian J is individualistic and bold.

Her mind is set. She's tried Hart and Lockhart but found them too pretentious. In her opinion, the "Wh-" sound compliments her first name, but White is as basic as Smith. She's always come back to, "Ian J. Fox," to which she can confidently say, "that's my name."

Logistics are the biggest obstacle now. From our interview, I gather there's no swaying her decision. Soon, one less Smith will crowd the room, but no one should fear our extinction. I will remain "sky smith," and Ian J. will remain my sister. Our family tree will sprout an unexpected branch, forged by Ian J. Fox.