

The Power of Naming a Person

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EXTRACTS FROM:
THE UNHEARD MEMORIES OF AUGUSTUS LEEDS, A NOVEL
BY LAUREN MARSHALL-NICHOLS

PART ONE

DECEMBER 1951

He was leaving. Down the stairs, out of the door. Her baby—well, not really. She had brought him up and loved him, done all the motherly deeds. But it wasn't her job anymore. He had two parents now, parents who would love and care for him, perhaps even better than she had. She hoped that they would give him everything that he wanted when, really, they were all he ever wanted, maybe needed. Nonetheless, she had to detach and be selfless, allow him to lead a most wonderful life. Perhaps one day he'd pay her a visit, with his own family.

Worries and a curious sense of... happiness? were bubbling and swirling round Georgina's head like soapy water going down a drain. After being lost in her own thoughts for so long she nearly forgot what was happening when there was a forceful knocking on the front door

They were here.

Georgina, known to her many orphans as Nanny Gee, thought at first that they were early, but they weren't; not even by a second. She took a deep, shaky breath and stitched a smile on to her face.

Augustus was ever so slight as he looked up at her uncertainly with his doe-like eyes, glassy blue. He was waiting for her to urge him on, she realised. Stuffing her emotions into a locked box in the back of her throat, she ruffled his coppery hair and he ducked away, grinning.

Stinging tears crept from the creases of her tired eyes, and her face fell. Of course, little Gus saw her downhearted expression and his brow creased, concerned. She crouched down opposite him and his tiny left thumb wiped away her tears, before joining his other hand in a spectacular flurry of motions. This still-new mother tongue, random and unusual, was known by some as *dactylogy*. But to him it was just... speaking.

“Are—you

—Okay?

Why —

Sad?

Nanny Gee's already cracked heart broke even more. But the Mitchams were waiting for their son. She inhaled, then exhaled, slowly, controlled, before standing tall and tugging open the door. The man and woman before her were smiling timidly, but Mrs Mitcham's hand was trembling and both seemed as though they had just seen a ghost.

“Come in! Come in!” ushered Nanny Gee, sweeping them into the worn hall.

Both parents evinced a sigh of relief at the warmth emanating from Miller's Orphanage and shook off crystalline snow as they stepped in.

Augustus shuffled out from behind the doorway of the kitchen, appearing terribly scruffy in his tattered trousers and plucked jumper. He was unfortunate in that he was the youngest, and being so small meant he could only grab the clothes which had been at the very bottom of the pile that Nanny had set in front of the boys earlier that month. Nanny tutted, straightening out his collar as

she muttered about clean shirts and new socks. Mr Mitcham, informally named Michael, roared out a laugh and to nobody's surprise, showed his newly learned skill of sign language, somehow saying to Gus how he looked as a young man should—"Like he's been on a fantastic adventure."

Augustus' smile spread across his face like jam on burnt toast on a winter's morning.

Thirty minutes later Augustus Mitcham (formerly Gussy Leeds) had wept his final goodbyes to his few friends at the orphanage, choked back heavy sobs when he had been given Joey's (who names a boy after a kangaroo?) favourite book (*Curious George*) and squealed when Nanny Gee, for the last time, held him so tightly he could barely breathe, herself sobbing uncontrollably.

He waved enthusiastically as the door closed behind him.

PART TWO

DECEMBER 1945

The storm that screamed white lightning and bullets of rain woke her up in the middle of the night. A particularly vicious bout of wind had whipped open the creaking window of her bedroom, piercing her loosely covered skin with its icy knives. Georgina—no—Nanny Gee, jumped up and tugged it closed, double checking the latch. Thinking that she should probably check on the many children in her care, she slipped on her soft shoes, glancing back at her bed longingly as she left her soft dreams in the room behind her.

In near silence, she softly opened each door on the first floor, seeing if the boys were asleep, or at the very least, still in their dormitories. Each one she checked, she made sure to scoop up at least some of the toys littering the floors and dump them in the play chest. There was the little wooden car that Henry, a pretentious name not suited for the humble boy, had made for Christopher, who had been aptly named for his caring nature, just before he left for work. James' favourite pull-along toy clattered as it dropped into the chest and the ABC book that Christopher had been learning from fell with a dull thud. As she closed the third door farthest away from her own, she heard the smallest sound, coming from downstairs.

Georgina put her hand to her chest, shielding the fist-sized organ which was beating rather quickly. She grabbed a torch off a small table on the landing, and lifted a cricket bat away from the wall, before creeping down the stairs. When no dark figure or silhouette appeared in the doorway or the hall, she breathed and pursed her lips— it was probably just one of the boys playing about. Setting down the bat and torch, she checked each room (there were only three) and glanced briefly from the hazy threshold to check if anyone was there. There wasn't. As she double checked the lock, she glimpsed a rough shape, illuminated by a jagged scar of white lightning for a split second. It was oddly shaped, almost like a rugby ball.

Then she heard it. She wasn't sure at first because it seemed so impossible, especially compared to the sheer weight of the storm. Georgina closed her eyes tightly, straining to hear the impossible noise. It was—most definitely, and uncontestably, a baby.

Crying.

Georgina's mind clicked, and she gasped, wrenching open the door and bending over to scoop up the basket.

"Oh, dear Lord, oh God you poor child, you poor little thing."

She inhaled sharply eyes wide and mouth agape, as she took the wicker carrier into the kitchen and sat it on the table. She flicked on the lights, and set the hot tap running, throwing a flannel under the spray. While the water poured from the spout, she grabbed spare blankets and set them in front of the hearth, which was swirling with tangerine flames in minutes.

But the baby was still crying. Loudly. She bustled over to the basket and carefully lifted out the squirming bundle of screams. Judging from the worn, blue blanket, it was a boy. And judging from its size, roughly similar to that of a cob loaf, it was very young.

Perhaps one week old? It could even be younger than that.

Georgina thought of the mother who had presumably left her child in the middle of the night, on the doorstep of an orphanage for boys, and wondered what had gone so wrong. She checked the basket for a note, a letter, anything. But there wasn't. Other than the foundling, the basket was empty.

PART THREE

DECEMBER 1946

Just one year after the baby had arrived, it appeared that he was leaving again. While she had tried to force herself not to become too attached, Nanny Gee had completely assumed a motherly role for her foundling. Today was exactly 365 days since he had arrived on her doorstep and she thought it poetic justice that he was to be rehomed (again) on that anniversary. He was a very special child—quiet and solemn, but strangely interactive with the other children. There had been, well, a few incidents, with footballs and the like, but he was perfectly healthy, it seemed. However, there had always been a minuscule uncertainty niggling at the back of Nanny Gee’s mind. She could just sense that something about him was different compared to the others she had taken in, although she had never cared for one so young, and it had been years since she had looked after a child younger than three.

While still convinced it was all in her own head, Georgina arranged a last-minute check-up with a local doctor anyway, just to put less stress on his new parents. That was what she told herself, at least.

Now, being the head of Miller’s Orphanage meant that Georgina could not leave the twenty-odd boys in her care to their own devices. She would return home and it would be chaos. Just imagining what havoc they could wreak gave her the chills, so she chose to telephone her sister. Perhaps that would end up even more disastrously, but she had some little hope that the girl could control at least the smaller ones and the older boys would be responsible.

This was not certain, but Georgina prayed that she had not been stupid to trust them. At the very least, a short visit to the doctor meant that they simply wouldn’t have enough time to ruin the house, let alone set fire to it, which would have been likely given that Jeremy, a silly boy with a silly name in Georgina’s view, had a worrying fascination with seeing how many candles he could light in the shortest span of time.

As it turned out, the doctor’s visit was not short, nor was it unreasonable. After almost a complete hour of odd instruments and devices, as well as a sound box, Georgina had been proven correct in her uncertainty of the baby’s health.

He was deaf.

Telling the adoptive parents was difficult. But explaining to the other children why the baby was staying and why he couldn’t hear was even harder. There did appear to be a rather unexpected silver-lining, despite the revelation, and the foundling was given a name. Nanny Gee had been reluctant to attach any deeply sentimental threads to him, and thought his adoptive parents should, but his chances of being rehomed were considerably lower now.

Georgina told the boys that they could name him, but they incessantly badgered her, until she agreed to impart some small love into the foundling’s new title. She thought for a long time, her tongue trying to grab onto some tangible, explainable title to christen him with, but she couldn’t. The needles that had been pushing on her heart for so long disappeared, and the power of a name so dear to her, so previously irreplaceable, forced itself out of her throat and swelled in the room.

Augustus.

He would be like his namesake—a leader, he would do things unexpected of him, things that would change people’s lives.

And all throughout, he would still be the foundling, the deaf orphan.

FIRE IN THE FORESTS

A STAGE PLAY

Lauren Marshall-Nichols

NOTE TO DIRECTOR AND CAST

The events catalogued in this script are based on true events and situations that occur on an everyday basis. We urge you to consider the consequences of these occurrences and be sensitive and respectful of the victims, as well as their friends and family.

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CHARACTERS

ACT I

DAULAT, an Indian woman

SAIRA, the sister of DAULAT

ALIMA, the daughter of SAIRA

ACT II

Any gender can be assigned to these characters, as this situation can be inflicted by/upon any gender.

ONE, the victim

TWO, the false friend

THREE, attacker #1

FOUR, attacker #2

ACT III

HARRIETT, a teenage girl

'MUM'

ACT I

SCENE 1

NARRATOR: In 90 percent of Acid Attack cases, the victim suffers from blindness. Between 2013 and 2014, there were 386 Acid Attacks.

--Stop Acid Attacks Campaign, India.

Two women are seated at a small table in a cramped room. There are five children in the room also. They are all eating fried fish, but one woman has stopped eating and is cleaning, back turned to the audience. The face of the woman who is eating cannot be seen by the audience.

LIGHTS UP as music score fades out.

SAIRA: (STOPS CLEANING. LOOKS STRAIGHT AHEAD OF HER)

Cold. It was cold at first. Thought she was playing about, started laughing. Just a silly game.

DAULAT: (STOPS EATING. LOOKS STRAIGHT AHEAD OF HER)

Hot. Unbearably hot. Too hot, burning. Ripping apart the skin, boiling it.

SAIRA: (TURNS AROUND TO REVEAL HEAVY, AGED SCARRING OVER HER ARMS, FACE, NECK AND CHEST)

They had... stripped off our skin.

Both ALIMA, one of the children, and DAULAT slowly peel the fried skin off of the fish they are eating.

Sprinkled chilli powder inside.

DAULAT: (TURNS TO REVEAL SIMILAR SCARRING TO SAIRA)

There was smoke.

Smoke begins to seep on stage. The lights go down, and a spotlight follows DAULAT.

Everywhere, smoky blackness. Nothing, *nothing* could compare. Even a *Killer Khilat* would have been more merciful.

ALIMA: (SINGING, STILL LOOKING DOWN AT HER FOOD SO HER FACE IS NOT VISIBLE)

The pretty dress, the pretty dress, purple poison in my dress purple poison 'till you're—

DAULAT *covers ALIMA'S mouth before she finishes the song. SAIRA and DAULAT pause and look at each other before SAIRA begins speaking again.*

The spotlight finds SAIRA who is leaning against the table.

SAIRA: We must have passed out. I can't remember what happened after that. The baby was screaming. My baby. Alima.

ALIMA who has scarring also, stands and begins screaming.

SAIRA: She didn't want us dead, though. Did she?

The child stops screaming but stays standing.

DAULAT: She wanted...to maim,

SAIRA: Torture,

DAULAT: Ruin us.

SAIRA: And look at us now. She succeeded, didn't she? No money, no jobs worth having.

DAULAT; Oh the ironies haven't been lost on me. Daulat. 'Wealth' in Hindi. A makeup artist? Who will hire me to make others beautiful when I am so scarred myself?

SAIRA: But we are alive. (SHE TAKES THE CHILD'S HAND, HELPS HER OFF OF THE CHAIR AND EMBRACES FROM BEHIND WITH ARM ACROSS SHOULDERS)

Music begins to fade in.

DAULAT: I refuse to stop living my life. It is mine. She cannot
reclaim it.

BLACK OUT

ACT II SCENE 1

NARRATOR: Approximately 85,000 women and 12,000 men are raped in England and Wales, every year. That is roughly eleven rapes an hour, of adults alone.

 --Rape Crisis Organisation.

A dimly lit room, with party music playing in the background, is scattered with teenagers in pairs or small groups. Some are laughing and talking, while one group is playing beer pong.

Two people are standing upstage, to one side. Both have drinks and are talking amicably.

ONE: So (DRAGGING OUT THE 'O') How are you? How's work?

TWO: I'm pretty good, sorry I haven't called or anything, got promoted so I'm on more... serious jobs nowadays.

ONE: Oooooohh, fancy. Serious Jobs?

TWO: (NERVOUSLY) Gah, it's nothing you wanna hear, boring stuff. How's the everlasting quest for love going?

BOTH laugh, and ONE puts their hand on the others casually. TWO looks at the hand on their arm and then up at ONE.

TWO: (COUGHS)

 Oh, your drink is empty. Want another one?

ONE: Well actually—

TWO: (INTERRUPTING, TAKING ONE'S DRINK.)

 Great. I'll get you one. Back in a min.

 (THEY SHAKE THEIR HEAD AT TWO PEOPLE IN THE CORNER, EYES PLEADING)

The two people shake their head no and begin walking towards ONE and TWO.

 (LOOKING AT ONE)

 I'm so sorry. I am so, so sorry.

ONE: (CONFUSED) What? What for?

 (THEY PUT A HAND TO THEIR HEAD)

Can you stay? I don't feel-

TWO walks offstage, and ONE watches them leave, and sways a bit before taking out their phone.

LIGHTS BEGIN CHANGING COLOUR, GETTING BRIGHTER AND THEN DARKER.

The two people (THREE and FOUR) walk up to ONE and stand very closely, THREE taking ONE'S phone.

ONE reaches out to grab the phone back, but FOUR'S forearm blocks them.

ONE: (SLURRED) Hey! That's not yours! Give it back!

ONE moves forward to grab it again, but THREE stands behind them and wraps an arm around their waist, laughing.

FOUR: (SMIRKING)

Watch it, sweetheart. You don't want us getting too excited just yet.

THREE: (MOVES THEIR HAND LOWER, TOWARDS THE WAISTBAND OF ONE'S JEANS)

Yeah... we don't want the party to end before it really gets going, do we?

ONE: (ATTEMPTING TO PULL AWAY AND PUSH OFF THREE'S ARM)

Get the fuck away from me! Somebo-

When ONE shouts, a young girl with scarring on her face turns away from her group to look at ONE, THREE and FOUR. She is the only other person in the entire room who moves. She bites her lip and looks between her friends and ONE.

FOUR covers ONE'S mouth and moves to block the scene from the view of others in the room. he nods at THREE, the girl who looked at them before goes on her tip toes to look for ONE but shrugs and turns back to her group when she can't find them.

FOUR: Out back? Might be safer.

THREE: (LICKING THEIR LIPS)

But where's the fun in that? We should have this little slut right here, so it can see everyone around us, and know that nobody can help it. Nobody wants to help a filthy whore like ours.

ONE *begins to cry and they struggle against FOUR'S hand, then bites it.*

FOUR: (SHAKING THEIR HAND AND PUNCHING ONE IN THE STOMACH WITH THE OTHER)

What the fuck, you little bitch? You should want this. We could have any of the little sluts in this room but we chose you. You should be grateful.

THREE: (PUSHING THEIR HAND INTO ONE'S JEANS)

Yeah. You were... recommended to us. Your little friend over there?

(THREE POINTS AT WHERE TWO EXITED)

Well, your little friend was the one that gave us the go signal. Brilliant friend, wouldn't you agree? So nice of 'em to share with us.

BLACK OUT

ONE *begins to cry harder.*

FOUR: Shhhh. You'll learn to like it.

ACT III SCENE 1

A teenage girl is sitting in her bedroom, it is dark, and she is completely focused on her computer, the screen of which is the only source of light in the room.

(KNOCK ON DOOR)

MUM: Harry? Come on, its late and you've got school tomorrow.

HARRIETT ignores her and continues reading from her laptop.

Harriett? What are you even reading?

She moves towards HARRIETT and reads the article that is open on the computer.

MUM: Jesus Christ, Harry. Why are you even reading this? A young lady like you shouldn't be reading about such horrible things.

HARRIETT: Seriously? (SHE LIFTS HER HANDS AND GESTURES QUOTATION MARKS) "Young Lady?" Don't you realise how-

MUM closes the laptop sharply and HARRIETT goes to protest

MUM: Bed. Now.

MUM leaves the room, closing the door. After five seconds, HARRIETT opens her laptop again.

The image of a laptop screen, with two windows open is projected onto the blank back wall.

One window shows a news article about acid attack victims in India, and the other is a campaign

website that shares rape victim stories.

(CLICK) The image disappears and HARRIETT closes her laptop

BLACK OUT

Reflective Commentary

The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds begins with my favourite name, Augustus. When I started writing about him, I knew he needed some defining quality. At the time, I was learning British Sign Language, and inexorably this shaped the narrative.

Starting *Fire in the Forests* was more frustrating. I wanted a play on the ideals of Feminism, but “the belief that men and women are equal,” is vague. While literature was a great influence, my true inspiration was a documentary. ‘Girl Rising’ evolved my views on the world, evoking anger at misogyny.

While the inception of *The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds* was clear, its composition was not. It contains analepsis and prolepsis, leaving issues of order: *Fabula* is followed easily, but *syuzhet* allowed an engaging beginning *in media res*. I struggled to establish a chronological setting: he wouldn’t fit in modern times. To resolve, I reordered sections, seeing which worked effectively. I chose *syuzhet*. External analepsis and prolepsis offered opportunities to give the backstory about my characters in a more interesting way than conventional chronology. I settled on 1945-1951, as it followed World War II (giving a reason for the orphans) and challenged me by requiring experimentation with an unfamiliar period.

After overcoming these challenges, I redrafted. The significant change between drafts of both *The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds* and *Fire in the Forests* was in showing instead of telling, permitting more confident writing. The first prose draft featured the phrase “Augustus looked so slight” and by changing to “Augustus was so slight” the narrative became focused, and linked more with focalisation and free indirect speech. Similar changes made in the script used stage directions to connect dialogue and movement. For example, the first draft has Saira say “They had... stripped off our skin.” This is improved with the stage direction “(Alima and Daulat) slowly peel the fried skin off of the fish”, making the performance mimetic, evincing how showing can make a piece enthralling. These small revisions, when applied throughout, make the overall piece effective and intriguing.

These changes reflect my drafting process. The first corrections I made after workshopping were to review spelling and grammar. I made these changes first, since they are the simplest, allowing me to read the pieces forensically. I found that spotting these errors led me to envisage more ambitious improvements, such as in the quality of sentence structure.

Complication with sentence structure arose in *The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds* in that sentences became repetitively constructed. This was problematic, because it gave too regular a rhythm, disinteresting the reader. At first I varied sentence structure —as shown here: “He was leaving. Down the stairs, out the door. Her baby, well not really she had raised him and loved him, done all the motherly deeds.” But the writing became monotonous and lacked variation. However, I resolved this, which we can see from “She wasn’t sure at first because it seemed so impossible, especially compared to the sheer weight of the storm. Georgina closed her eyes tightly, straining to hear the impossible noise. It was—most definitely and uncontestably a baby. Crying.” that the inclusion of short sentences against complex ones gave the composition enough impact to involve the reader.

Other authors helped influence sentence structure. I found William Golding inspiring as he often writes about children in difficult situations. The opening of *Darkness Visible*, published in 1979, shows how sentence variation can develop writing. It indicates that longer sentences are effective and give vivacity. The first chapter shows this: “There was a kind of tent in the sky over London, which was composed of the faint white beams of searchlights, with barrage balloons dotted here and there. The barrage balloons were all that the searchlights discovered in the sky, and the bombs came down, it seemed, mysteriously out of emptiness.”¹ When redrafting the prose, I aimed to imitate this matter-of-fact style which allows the content to become more powerful.

The script was inspired differently—writing techniques didn’t inspire me, but different narratives. *This Bridge Called my Back*, edited by Cherrie Morago and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, collects stories from various people, all with distinctive telling. This is where my writing mirrors other pieces, such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, as *Fire in the Forests* is written from multiple viewpoints, about real occurrences. Another point of inspiration was Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*, which was inspirational as it was both script and collection of stories. Workshop leaders recommended it when I explained how I was struggling to find a stimulus. After watching the performance, I was certain about the direction to take.

G rard Genette defines transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.”² The prose piece evinces intertextuality, with an imitation of structure of works such as *Darkness Visible*. In the script, I draw ideas about storytelling and narrative from authors such as Eve Ensler, but it does not cleanly fit into any of the five types that Genette describes, although I still recognise it as intertextuality.

Between *The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds* and *Fire in the Forests* the style differed, but both echo myself. I developed my voice in the script before elaborating on the plot, as “once I have the voice I have the novel”--or the script in this case, to echo Lloyd Jones.

The script uses voices that won’t skip horrible realities. I used these tones to shock the audience, to show them the painful reality of violence against women particularly. This is evident in Act II, where the audience is thrust into a rape scene and dialogue such as “We should have this little slut right here” shocks and discomforts viewers. When developing tone, it was important I didn’t sugar-coat. The audience needs to be disgusted: otherwise the point is missed.

The voice conveyed throughout the prose is optimistic, idealistic, focalising on Nanny Gee using free indirect speech. Despite the events, I wanted to show that nothing is ever all bad. The choice of narrative informed the tone set. I chose third person to explore focalisation. From the start the reader knows Nanny Gee’s feelings, although she isn’t telling herself. Phrases such as “Her baby—well not really, she had brought him up and loved him” shows the story is being told by Georgina. This allows an understanding emotions while being presented with external focalisation and exploration of physical aspects such as sign language. This technique dates back to literary works such as *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James.

A point brought to my attention during workshop was the choice of third person, allowing the story to be told where Augustus couldn’t tell it. He’s deaf, mute. *The Unheard Memories of Augustus Leeds* are unheard because he hasn’t told them— they’re documented by others. This makes the narratology complex, giving meaning to the title by using it as a clue of revelations made later on. When continuing the prose, the narratology will be refocalised on Augustus, introducing

¹ Golding, William, *Darkness Visible*, page 1

² Genette, Gerard, *The Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*

starting final drafts I realised the link was names, or identity. A name inspired the prose, and the irony of names is reflected throughout the script. It shows how names are not defining, especially in Act II where no characters have names, reinforcing that rape can be inflicted upon anybody. What can names do and what do they mean?

If I had time, I would complete at least two further drafts for each mode. I would plan and research techniques more thoroughly to make the writing more technical. In the future, I will give myself opportunities to expand on my writing and allow experimentation with theme and form. My writing isn't flawless. There are weaknesses, but that does not mean that it's unsuccessful. My goal when I began this course was to write something I was proud of, something I smile when I think of. I believe I achieved that goal.

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