

# ELLIS MORNING

By Elise Marenson

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest editor/author GREGORY CIOFFI writes:*

*"What's in a name?" asked Juliet from her balcony. "EVERYTHING!" screamed Ellis Morning from his park bench.*

*Here is a man who became nocturnal to spite his own name. A man whose sole ambition is to make a name for himself by choosing a new name. No wonder he dreams of moving away from Morningside Heights.*

*This story is wittily intelligent and candidly relatable, even if you love your name. It is more than a worthwhile read; it's a highly recommended one.*

*As we delve into Ellis' tale, I found it extremely interesting to watch the protagonist attempt to distance himself from his surname while we simultaneously observe, through short and amusing anecdotes, how very much alike he is to his father and the familial legacy of Mornings. That juxtaposition brings into focus the idea that sometimes the only paternal family heirloom we truly have is our name. After all, what is an inheritance if not a collection of genes, names, and allergies.*

*The writing may have metaphysically bled onto another level as well. "It was clear now that this was a larger project than he had anticipated, but he had to get it right." Even if this piece did indeed start out as a literary exercise to see how far one could push a single idea, it was so pleasurable that I could have easily read another fourteen pages on this subject in the same sitting.*

*Kudos. We should be on the lookout for more of Elise Marenson's work; who knows - it just may become a household name (unless of course, it changes).*

*Quote: "He wondered if he should wear a name tag in the street to measure the reaction of random citizens. For how long a period of time the neighborhood focus group should last, he didn't know yet."*

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Ellis Morning awoke early and made the decision to rid himself of his surname. It was high time he free himself from the mockery he had endured all his life. He had no particular attachment to Morning, the family moniker of dubious origin. His parents were lying under a tombstone by the Long Island Expressway. He was an only child with one paternal cousin who lived in the Midwest. No one would care what he was called, except him.

He was tired of people greeting him with, “Hello, Mr. Evening”. The thin gag had worn out by the fourth grade. Everyone who shouted, “Hey, Morning Glory,” disgusted him, as if it were the first time someone had made fun of his name. The gall of the joker, thinking he was being original, was more infuriating to Ellis than all the witless nicknames that had ever been thrown in his face.

Ellis left his tiny studio apartment to walk over to Riverside Park. It was a perfect spring day for his mind to work fluidly, without the extremes of city weather. He would draw up a list of potential names, while seated comfortably on his favorite bench overlooking the Hudson.

Ellis was a man of slight build. His reedy physique made it impossible to pinpoint his age, not even down to the decade of his life. He wasn't an athlete, but he had played handball against the wall of a decaying brownstone when he was a boy. The vacant lot, where he and his buddies cupped a Spalding ball and threw it, was now a glass condominium. The landscape of the neighborhood had been so altered that he could barely remember the candy store that sold red licorice or where his grandmother's purse was snatched.

He crossed the street where West End Avenue meets Broadway. He liked that route, with one avenue flowing into another. It was a break from the monotonous grid of Manhattan streets. The little, flowered triangle there reminded him of Europe, where he hadn't been in years. He always wondered if it was a coincidence that he grew up on the frontier of Morningside Heights. Perhaps his great grandfather had taken the name Morning in honor of his degree in philosophy from Columbia University.

Ellis was relieved to find his park bench unoccupied, for he needed concentration to conjure up a suitable name. He sat down in the center of his bench, in order to encourage others not to share and go for another one. There was a light breeze on his face from the river, a sign to Ellis that the universe was in tandem with his creative wind.

He had suffered through years of teasing. Nonetheless, he understood that he couldn't eradicate Morning until he customized a first-class last name. He needed a designation

that made him feel strong and superior yet dignified. It should impress but not dazzle. There can't be a hint of loftiness which would be uncharacteristic of him. His new appellation had to be original like Shakespeare but not so peculiar that no one could remember it. The most important element, it must command respect instead of ridicule.

Ellis watched a pigeon stand in the path of bikers moving up and down the river promenade. The pigeon didn't move, despite the spinning bicycle wheels nearly hitting him. He wondered if the pigeon was wounded and thought of getting up off his bench in a humane gesture to save it. But he would forfeit his seat to some quick stepped pedestrian, to whom his bench had no significance. He couldn't risk upsetting the nimbleness of his mind, if he had to move to a different bench. He wasn't exactly OCD, but he relied on his rituals. Order governed his thought process which had to be acute on a day he was choosing a new name. He wasn't so old for it to be inconceivable that he would carry it longer than Morning.

Seated firmly on his park bench, Ellis was feeling his mental agility. He would be reincarnated, in a manner of speaking, in just hours. He would enter the lobby of his apartment building, not the man he was when he departed. Even at night, Jorge the doorman would welcome him with, "Morning, Mister Morning," and shake his head and let out a chuckle. Jorge's joke never got stale to Jorge. But Ellis would walk past the smart mouthed gatekeeper without acknowledgement, as if it were a case of mistaken identity. He would open his mailbox, tear off the engraved black tag that says Ellis Morning, and replace it with his new name.

Ellis sat back with a smile that radiated accomplishment. By the end of the day, the lifelong embarrassment of being called Mister Morning would be over. In a movement of extreme confidence he didn't normally experience, he stretched his legs out. Bikers had to go around him.

He wasn't defying any religious tenet. Ellis Morning wasn't his God given name. His mother had traded in Episcopalianism for nudism and didn't believe in baptism. His birth certificate filed at the Bureau of Vital Statistics had him down as Ellis Morning, but that was only in the secular world. In the eyes of the Lord, there was still time to become a man of great stature. He thought he might detour over to St. John the Divine on his way home to inquire whether there was an age limit on christenings. He liked the idea of having his new name announced in a giant cathedral.

Ellis shifted on his bench. Stilted blood circulation would impede the free flow of his ideas. He crossed his outstretched legs, resting his weaker left leg on his right knee. He believed that he wasn't a superficial man. If he was going to truly revamp himself, then maybe he ought to overhaul his character before he sported a new name. The size of this augmented task caused him agitation. He couldn't finish by noon.

Ellis thought he should make a list of his outstanding characteristics, both good and bad. He understood that his most endearing traits might be regarded as negative. He was guileless to a fault. It had cost him dearly in romance. No woman wants to hear the truth

about her fleshy body. He preferred a little plumpness, though the woman was usually self-conscious about being flabbier than he. He realized while he was still a young man that he lacked the acumen needed to select an appropriate mate. And so he remained a bachelor, not unhappy with his situation.

He was thrifty but hardly parsimonious. He never left the bank without depositing a quarter in the cup of the poor fellow holding the door open for him. If it was a woman with her hand out, then he gave fifty cents. He couldn't afford to be a spendthrift with the modest estate his mother left him.

His father was a man who had lived through misfortune. His mother called him a charming dreamer when she was being gracious. During less compassionate moments, her big zinger was that he was a depraved deadbeat. Ellis considered his father's indigence not entirely his fault. The Mornings, or whatever they were called, were horse thieves in the old country. Like so many immigrants, they hoped to bring their trade with them to America. They thrived in New York City, until the invention of the automobile. His great grandfather tried to turn things around by attending Columbia University, but his miscalculated choice of study, philosophy, didn't bring him the American dream.

To not make the mistake of his impractical great grandfather, Ellis enrolled in accounting classes at Pace University. But the morning subway ride from the heights to the financial district was long and grueling. He caught a light case of claustrophobia and couldn't stand the crowds commuting to and from work. He switched to night school and was

quite satisfied with his nocturnal schedule, until the numbers in his accounting books began dancing before his eyes. He knew he was in crisis when he was diagnosed with numeric dyslexia. That was the end of Ellis' goal to become a certified public accountant.

Ellis wasn't a lazy man, like his father, but he was allergic to the pressed wood filled with formaldehyde that covers the walls and desks of offices. He concluded that he would have to take an outdoor profession like his ancestors. He toyed with moving to Wyoming to go into their business of horse rustling, but he was terrified of rural areas. There weren't many cerebral, exterior jobs in New York City. He apprenticed as a penthouse gardener but quit prematurely because he was afraid of heights.

Ellis stood up. The view of New Jersey from his bench wasn't inspiring him. He needed a change in venue for fresh ideas. He headed down to the boat basin in a leisurely stroll. Rushing would only sap his energy, and then he wouldn't be able to intuit the right name for himself. He inhaled the aroma of spring blossoms. Riverside Park was lush and verdant. He may not possess the gift of profound joy, but he was most content by the river. He was grateful to the universe that he wasn't wasting his time being employed.

The long walk to the boat basin invigorated Ellis. Watching the boats always lifted his spirits, no matter how melancholy he had been when he woke up. When he was a boy, he wished he could live on a houseboat that used to anchor in the little port. He begged his mother every Christmas to buy him one. They could leave their grayish, pre-war apartment and go live on the Hudson. His mother's reply was always the same, year after

year. She said river life was dangerous, and even though he'd learned to swim at the New York Athletic Club day camp, he had the weak lungs of his maternal grandmother, and if he fell overboard, he couldn't survive.

Ellis put his hands on the high gate that kept trespassers from the diminutive marina. He was envious of the serenity the invisible boat dwellers must have found on the river. He should have been living there with them, were it not for the aquaphobia that ran through the genes of his mother's family. When he was born, there was no genetic testing, or his father never would have married his mother. Ellis felt so connected to the boats that he had a brainstorm. He would take his new name from them.

He was a methodical man. He didn't want to select one until he had read the name on every boat. Even if he came across a spectacular name before he finished, he would feel uneasy if he hadn't considered them all. He would write down the leading five candidates and assess their qualities. His last name should be pronounceable, mellifluous, geographically relevant, and harmonious with his first name Ellis.

Morning was smack in the middle of the alphabet. He wanted to be bumped to the top. He had waited in too many long lines. In elementary school, whenever the teacher made two groups, the Ns would always head the second line. He would be fuming at the end of the first line. He thought that to be fair, the teacher should sometimes make the cut off after the Ls. It got worse during the year his mother was a Catholic. When the rigors of life had become too much for her, she contemplated becoming a nun. She put him in

parochial school, thinking it would look good on her application. At mass, he had to stand still behind all those McCarthys and McSweeneys, waiting to get his wafer.

He was never happier than the day his mother converted back to the Episcopal faith. That meant church once a year instead of every Sunday. Then they began skipping attendance altogether to spend Christmas in Florida with his great uncle.

He loved his great uncle Olaf. Olaf came from the Norwegian neighborhood in Brooklyn. He marched in the Norwegian parade every year, even as it dwindled to twenty or thirty people. He had been married to his grandmother's younger sister, until Ellis was in fifth grade. His mother explained to him that his great aunt was moving downtown to live with a very nice lady. Uncle Olaf moved to Florida to become a marine explorer like Jacques Cousteau. It was a natural career choice for a man with Viking heritage. Uncle Olaf wasn't related to them by blood and didn't carry the genetic defect of aquaphobia. But he was afraid of jelly fish. Being a realistic man, Uncle Olaf opened a motel.

Every year, Uncle Olaf reserved his best efficiency suite for them for two weeks in December. His mother and father and Ellis drove down south in the green Oldsmobile that a fellow freemason of his father's bequeathed them. Apart from South Carolina, where a nasty officer flagged their New York plates in a speed trap, the car trip was the highlight of Ellis' year. He loved the southern fried chicken served in the motels they stayed in during the three-day drive. He hoarded the pecan patties they bought at roadside

stands. He felt a thrill when he saw the first palm trees, the hint they were getting nearer to paradise in Florida.

In the motel efficiency, his mother and father slept in the bedroom. Uncle Olaf set up a cot for Ellis in the living room. He loved the wall pictures of flamingos, orange groves, and Seminoles fighting alligators. Every morning, he ran to the motel office. Uncle Olaf and he would pour over brochures of Norway and the fjords. They planned to make a voyage together, retracing the Atlantic route of the Vikings who discovered America.

After five perfect Christmas vacations at his great uncle's Florida motel, Ellis and his mother and father drove there in the Oldsmobile one last time. Uncle Olaf told Ellis that he was becoming a man. Next summer, the two of them would fly to Norway to begin their Viking reenactment. The best day in Ellis' life turned out to be the worst. Uncle Olaf wanted to be prepared for the journey like a true Norseman. He went into the ocean, which he never did, because of his fear of jelly fish. He had barely put one toe in, when he was stung by an entire family of men o' war. It was instant death. Ellis would never forget seeing his great uncle sprawled on the shoreline, his blond locks all sandy, with his bright blue dead eyes gazing in the direction of Scandinavia.

The motel was sold to a guy named Raj. His mother told Raj that it was Uncle Olaf's wish that they continue their tradition of spending two free weeks there in December. Raj told his mother that they were welcome to reserve the same efficiency for winter vacation, but they would have to pay the high season rate. Uncle Olaf had neglected to

include the codicil about the free room in his will. His mother explained to Raj that it was precedence, the basis of English common law. When Raj pretended not to understand, she exploded screaming, “Didn’t the British teach you people anything?”

Ellis leaned against the railing of the river promenade, wiping a tear from his eye. The events surrounding Uncle Olaf’s untimely death still upset him. He had never been able to set foot in Florida again, although he still adored palm trees. If he wanted his fill of them, he had to venture to the winter garden in the World Financial Center. This is a perfect example of why he needed a boat, he thought. He could sail from Morningside Heights down the river to the tip of the island, avoiding the crowds and filth of the subway. The mild claustrophobia that gripped him as a young man had only intensified.

The boats always soothed him but made his mind wander. He had strayed way off his course of choosing a new name. He was standing there at the boat basin for inspiration. He debated whether his eyes should travel around the moored craft clockwise or counterclockwise. He decided that clockwise was easier on his neck.

He began on his left with a grey white motorboat, tied to the pier with a rope. He felt certain he would be a gifted sailor, if he had a boat. His love of the water meant that he had the recessive gene for aquaphobia, although he was a carrier. One of the reasons he never married was that he wouldn’t pass that malady onto his offspring. There was no name painted on the starboard side of the motorboat. He moved along the promenade

railing, trying to view the stern. He bent over so far, he nearly fell in. With his grandmother's weak lungs, he had narrowly escaped his demise.

The next boat in sequence was a rickety boat in need of a paint job. It had no name which was just as well, Ellis thought. It looked like someone hiding from the law lived there.

The third boat was freshly painted a bluish white. Its name was Mary Doric. Mary was a woman's first name. It was another M, end of the line, out of the question. He thought about being called Ellis Doric. Its consonants were hard. And if he were going to be called a Greek column, he had always preferred ionic. Ellis Ionic wouldn't do either.

The fourth boat was so teeny that it was nearly hidden by its two neighbors. If it had a name, he couldn't see it. He asked himself if that was sufficient justification to ignore it and go to the next boat. Without access to the locked marina, he had no choice but to move on. His eyes skipped over three small boats with outboard motors and landed on a tangerine awning that crowned the tip of the short pier. He felt queasy, having upset his methodology already. He knew he would have to double back, but he couldn't help it.

The last boat with the tangerine awning drew him in. It looked just big enough to house one person. Ellis wondered who could live alone at the end of a pier with no sign of life.

He didn't have a roommate, but he didn't consider himself a lonely man. There was his neighbor, Miss Babin, always ready to chat with him whenever they met in the hall. Most of their conversations revolved around their ailments. It was never boring because he and Miss Babin had different afflictions. She had flaky palms, like dandruff of the hand. The

New York Public Library had banned her because she returned books with pages full of white scales. Her niece bought her a used E-book for her birthday, so she could read and shed without repercussions.

Ellis smiled thinking of his friend Miss Babin. Her Acadian forebears were caught in a terrible storm on their way to Louisiana and shipwrecked off Montauk Point. The Shinnecock Indians rescued them and gave them clams to eat. Then the Babins made their way on foot across Long Island. When they reached Brooklyn, they traded the wet Canadian furs on their back for a skiff. They sailed up the Hudson to Morningside Heights and settled there. Although she had never been to Louisiana, Miss Babin invited Ellis once a month for a gumbo she cooked, in honor of the Cajun woman she might have been.

Nobody had entered or exited any of the boats since Ellis arrived. In all the years he had been envious of these river people, he had never glimpsed one of them. There was never a soul on the piers. When sinister thoughts of drug ring fronts and fenced goods or the witness protection program popped into his head, he suppressed them. He preferred to think of the boat basin as the upper west side's Brigadoon, coming to life at sunrise and fading into the night. It was a mysterious but magical place.

Ellis realized maybe there was wisdom in his mother's refusal to buy a houseboat and relocate to the river. He might have been stuck there now, all alone, without his rent control apartment. He didn't have many friends, but they all lived on land. He had

foolishly forgotten the role his friends should play in approving his new name. He would try out each of the five finalist names on them. He would poll them, not that he wouldn't veto their opinions if he didn't agree. He couldn't decide whether he should give his doorman Jorge a vote.

He had completely disregarded the necessity of a trial period. He might open up the testing to all of Morningside Heights. He wondered if he should wear a name tag in the street to measure the reaction of random citizens. For how long a period of time the neighborhood focus group should last, he didn't know yet. He would play that by ear. It was clear now that this was a larger project than he had anticipated, but he had to get it right. He may have been too cocky thinking he could firm up his new identity by tonight.

Ellis looked at his Van Cleef and Arpels classic watch. It was all he had inherited from his father. His father had left the green Oldsmobile to Ellis in his will, but the car had hit the junkyard before he died. His grandfather had won the watch in a poker game. It was the only paternal family heirloom, a keepsake to link generations of Mornings, or whatever they were called.

It was past noon. He was getting hungry, and there was no point in forcing himself to think on an empty stomach. He had already missed his first deadline. The café by the boat basin charged six dollars for a hot dog. Ellis hated the gentrified park. When he was a boy, there was graffiti on the stone that smelled of piss. He would have to go over to Broadway for a bagel and resume his name selection after lunch. His favorite bagel shop

had twenty-three flavors. He would not waste time deciding and simply order an everything bagel. While he ate, he would memorize all the flavors, a mental exercise that would sharpen his mind for his afternoon work.

Ellis exited the park and crossed Riverside Drive, elated by all that he had accomplished this morning. As he reached Broadway, he came to a crucial decision about finding his new name. Given the importance of this life changing task, he wouldn't be hasty. He had given himself a colossal undertaking. The name Morning had been his cross to bear, and he had born it bravely and survived. He could live as Ellis Morning one more day.

END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wish I could say that I was influenced by Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, or the great wits of the Algonquin Round Table. But I wasn't. My mind is full of memories of the most minor moments in my life – incidents that left an indelible mark. I surprise myself with what pops out of this repository of feelings and impressions, some that go back years. Like many little girls, I loved the novels of the Brontë sisters, as well as those of Thomas Hardy, James Baldwin, and later Pat Conroy. But it is the humor of New York City that probably influenced me the most. Humor is our saving grace. It is how we communicate; how we survive in this city teeming with people from all the world's nations (we even have Himalayan Sherpas in the Bronx). Ellis has more to say, about his city, about the planet Earth.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** *Elise Marenson was an actor before becoming a writer. "Having been an actor contributes richly to my writing". She has written numerous screenplays and stage plays in drama and comedy. She optioned a holiday TV script in October 2019 to Formula Features. Also, in 2019, her political play Critical Affairs was seen in the LIC Short Play Festival. Her dark comedy one-act Head Trauma was part of the Boo Festival at the Players Theatre in New York. Her play Wide Blossoms was produced at HERE Arts Center in October/November 2016 in New York. In 2015, her play Real Estate of Emergency had a production at Metropolitan Playhouse in New York. Learn To Drive was voted Best Drama at the First Stage Los Angeles Playwrights Festival in 2014. Colony was seen in the 2014 Midtown International Theatre Festival. In 2011, she wrote and directed Straight From The Rib, a show gleaned from life experience, with twenty-seven monologues performed by a cast of nine women at the Triad NYC. She directed*

*productions at the Abingdon Theatre, WorkShop Theater Company, Samuel French OOB Festival, New Center Stages, Strawberry Theatre Festival, Sounding Theater, Atlantic Theater School, Westbeth Theatre, The Triad, as well as numerous readings. With her play American Flamingos, she recently completed another full-length play Comfort Zones. She holds two screenplay options and is currently developing a TV series with a female lead detective covering social and political storylines. Her feature length screenplays Jeremy, Malcolm, and Bess, Spacious Skies, Chorus Girl, and Picked Out, were finalists in Ace Fest, FilmMakers International, Scriptapalooza, and Chesterfield Writers Film Project competitions. She is a script consultant and has taught acting, using what she learned from her teacher Uta Hagen. She is a member of SAG-AFTRA, AEA, and NYWIFT (NY Women in Film & Television).*

*Ellis Morning is her second short story. She is bilingual in English & French.*

**EDITOR'S BIO:** *Gregory Cioffi (SAG-AFTRA, AEA) is a professional actor and a published writer. His works have been published in The Feral Press, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Queen Mob's Tea House, LittleOld Lady (LOL) Comedy, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, The Five-Two, Aphelion, and Allegory Ridge. Six of these stories have been archived in Yale University's Beinecke Collection (Rare Books and Manuscript Library). Greg's film (his foray into directing), The Museum of Lost Things, recently won awards at The Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts, and The Madrid International Film Festival. You might have noticed him on the stage or screen in The Irishman, The Godfather of Harlem, or in Tony n Tina's Wedding where, for the last 5 years, he has been married hundreds of times nationally and internationally. Greg teaches a creative writing course and a basic acting course at Nassau Community College. <http://www.gandeproductions.com> His story '**Misses Sisyphus**' appears in this issue (Fiction).*