



Nameless

Liam Vasseur-Viton

Foreword by Professor Stéphanie Durrans, Director of the Agen Campus, Université Bordeaux Montaigne

“Nameless” was awarded the first prize in a short story competition that was organized between September 2024 and April 2025 by the Agen Campus of Université Bordeaux Montaigne in partnership with the Corpus Christi Sister City Committee. It follows the story of an elite undercover operative who has no memory of his real name, living under constantly shifting identities as he carries out deadly missions. Posing as an insurance consultant, he infiltrates the life of Jason Campbell, a businessman unknowingly caught in the crossfire of a larger conspiracy involving a powerful cartel and a covert agency. As he and his partner, Emily—both former child assassins who defected from their original handlers—prepare to eliminate their targets, he begins to question the cycle of violence and deception that has defined his life.

The students who entered the contest benefited from the guidance of Valerie Harbolovic, chair of the Corpus Christi Sister City Committee and a published author herself, who generously shared writing tips and more general advice about how to write a story in the course of a creative writing class. The members of the jury—composed of both faculty and students¹—agreed that “Nameless” was highly imaginative and well-written. Liam Vasseur-Viton, a promising talent who was then in his second year of English studies at Université Bordeaux Montaigne, tackles a dense and complicated topic with the implied question: how do we ever know who we really are?

Nameless

Surely, the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about one’s identity is one’s name. Well, if I want to be more thorough, one’s own face or figure are close seconds and I’m certain that an important percentage of people define themselves and others through their physical attributes rather than by a sequence of letters that was assigned to them at birth. The irony is that I’m one of those people myself, though not by choice. However, in order to make my point, let’s agree that one’s name, if not the first thing that we associate with ourselves, is undoubtedly a foundation of one’s identity. After all, when someone tells you a story about a random person, this someone will tell you about that person’s name and maybe—but not necessarily—about one or two peculiar physical aspects. And though you do not know what that person may look like, it doesn’t matter at all because you associate them with their name. Their name is their identity. Moreover, the only people that change names are the ones that deeply desire—or need—to change their identity. People with deep, dark secrets, people running from their past, people uneasy with themselves, actors as well... Everyone that feels like they need to hide their identity from you, from the rest of the world, or from themselves.

¹ I would like to personally express my gratitude to literature enthusiasts Hannah Champion, Lhorine François, Capucine Lafon and Tiphaine Ribeau for participating in this jury that was presided by Valerie Harbolovic.

Believe me, I'm talking out of experience here, so you'll have to trust me on that one. No one's ever changed their name "just because." I mean, you can feel like you are not in a t-shirt mood today so you put on a blouse instead but when you feel like your own name doesn't suit you anymore, the real problem is not with your name but with yourself, with your very identity. And that's my problem. Because no matter how hard I try, I can't remember my damn name.

"Mr. Graham, sir? Mr. Campbell is ready to see you now."

Right, today I am Timothy Graham, insurance consultant. See this Mr. Jason Campbell that I'm here to meet; he is the C.E.O. of a pretty good-sized car rental company. It started out as a small family business right here in Glendale, Arizona. Campbell's father inherited a small car dealership from some relatives who died during World War II and, at some point, saw there was a void to fill in the car rental business. When my host took his father's place as C.E.O., the company had a state monopoly in the rental sector, but thanks to Jason and his keen sense for business, his company now operates in every state in the USA and is starting to build a good reputation nationwide. Although a well-informed person—like myself—knows he owes that success to his wife, Tia, who inherited her keen sense for business from her multibillionaire father, Miguel Lopez.

I follow the secretary down the corridor of the brand-new company's HQ's top floor. It's not a tall building—only four stories high—but Glendale is not a tall city and from the windows I get a good glimpse at the Phoenix skyline behind State Farm Stadium. I went there once. To the stadium I mean, for I've been to Phoenix several times. I was asked by my previous employer to do a job. A nasty one. The Fire Marshalls called it a cabin gas pipe leak. It was occupied by the owner of the Arizona Cardinals and it's true that he did like to smoke a cigar while watching the game. The Glendale PD closed the case. Perfectly executed. The secretary knocks on a door, opens it and invites me in before closing it behind me, leaving me alone with Jason Campbell. His office is neat but far from ostentatious. Actually, outside of the electronic appliances, there is probably not one item in the room that cost more than a thousand bucks. *Bucks*, I am starting to think like Michael Graham—born and raised in Tucson, Arizona—should talk. That's a good thing. It means I can focus more on Campbell than on correcting my wording. He walks around his desk to greet me. I throw my hand toward him.

"Michael Graham, pleased to meet you."

We shake hands. He smiles, but it does not strike me as fake. I can read hope in his eyes.

"Pleasure's all mine, Mr. Graham, really. As Jerry told you for sure, I'm in a bit of a tough spot right now."

He has a distinctive accent, and the Arizonian accent is easily erasable so he probably seldom leaves the state or at least never for very long. He walks back to the chair behind his desk and invites me to sit with a polite gesture.

"Yes, he did tell me. You've hit quite the unlucky streak from what I've gathered."

That he did. A week ago, I met Jerry at the Arizona Yale Graduates Club in Phoenix. I introduced myself as Michael Graham, 28 years old. We bonded over alleged common friends and professors and how exceptional it was that we never bumped into each other back at Yale with all our common classes and acquaintances. I acted as the man he wanted me to be: I flattered him, showed him how very impressed I was that he got a senior position at the Phoenix National Bank at such a young age; I agreed with him on the fact that Phoenix was a backwater city in a godforsaken state; I even had to laugh when he got tipsy and began making unbearable jokes about Mexicans before he drifted to misogynistic and disconcerting comments about women, and I finally gave him an "Amen to that!" when he started ranting about Mexican women. But that hard—and frankly disgusting—labour paid off. Four days later, while a fellow agent of mine made sure that Jason Campbell's consultant in insurance "accidentally" mismeasured his heart medication, I was strengthening Jerry's bond with Michael Graham over a game of golf followed by dinner at the Kai—on me of course. When

Campbell visited his banker and good friend Jerry on the following day, he told him about the death of the person that had been in charge of all the family and company insurance policies since his father's reign. One can only imagine the important place of insurances in the car rental business, especially when your top rental shop in Scottsdale got robbed the night before. What a coincidence, right? As planned, Jerry instantly thought about this Michael Graham he had just met. And here I am. But Campbell's real misfortune is that it's not even him that we are targeting. He simply is collateral damage. Just like his insurance consultant, or the family of the Cardinals' owner that was with him in the cabin that blew up at State Farm Stadium.

"Yeah. I really have, haven't I? And I don't know shit about insurance."

"Well, that's why I'm here."

"Right, tell me a bit 'bout yourself then, 'cause Jerry sure seems to appreciate you."

He said that last bit with a note of caution. He is a smart man, smarter than Jerry. He does not want to let me in so easily. Something is bothering me but I cannot quite put my finger on it. Actually, it is because there are a few things—a few hints if you prefer—that are bothering me. There is the office of course, but also the building: new but not fancy, built on his father's old garage. In Glendale of all places, when he could have moved to the city. He is not showing off and he is proud of his legacy. He wears a simple shirt, from a good brand and elegant but not that expensive, as well as what look to be comfortable shoes. And there is him. He is cautious about the type of person Jerry likes, so he is probably not like the type of person Jerry is. Plus, there is the accent. Jerry does not have the accent, nor anyone I met in the upper circles since I arrived. They all speak like perfect Easterners. He simply has this general air of nice entrepreneur about him, not big business shark like I was told he would be. All those things quickly add up in my mind and my gut tells me that he is not the kind of man I thought he was, that the informants messed up their job. Experience taught me to follow my gut.

"Oh, you know Jerry better than I do, but from what I gathered he'd shake the hand of his mother's killer if the guy offered him a few drinks."

Campbell bursts out laughing.

"So you have Jerry pretty much figured out."

This is encouraging, but the leap is now. Odds are that he simply acts as this nice Arizonian fellow and that the informants were right about him. That he only wants to appear as this person you can approach so that you lower your guard and the shark within him can eat you alive. But then again, years of training have sharpened my senses and I should trust that they never lie to me.

"Well, truth is, Jerry is nice 'n all but if you ask me, he never really left Yale."

"What do you mean?"

Though he tries to hide it, I can read all over his face that I have drawn his attention. He knows what I am building up to, or at least he hopes that it is what I'm building up to. It makes me more confident about my feeling.

"See, I met him at this meeting of Yale graduates a few days ago in the city, and all those guys like Jerry, whether they're born here or not... well I wouldn't say they don't respect the place, but they don't get it, you know. It's like they don't understand what it is to be Arizonian."

Truth be told, I have no idea what it is to be an Arizonian. I wasn't really born and raised here. But something tells me that Campbell does know. Before I can finish my monologue, a voice resonates in my ear.

"Agent Williams, what do you think you're doing?"

Do not worry, I am not going crazy. The voice—which is the one of my handler Mrs. Washington—comes from the almost undetectable ear-piece that I wear. Of course, there are no ways for me to answer without blowing my cover, but handlers are like that. Instead of

stating that they are not sure about your approach, that it does not correlate with what the informants collected on the matter, they ask you a stupid question which you can't answer anyway. I decide to ignore her and continue:

"They spend a few years in Connecticut and it changes them, you know. Believe me, I've seen it first-hand. When they come back, they're not Arizonian anymore, they're just some more Northerneasters."

My speech hits the mark, I can see it. A broad smile crosses Campbell's face.

"I can't say that I disagree, Mr. Graham, I really can't say that I do. In fact, I haven't heard someone make as much sense in a long time."

He bends over and opens a drawer. A burst of condensation flies up as he does, making me understand that the drawer is, in fact, refrigerated. He pulls out two cold beers and hands me one. He continues:

"It's the downside of success, you know. People in our circles, they really don't get the spirit of Arizona. They don't understand and respect how beautiful this peaceful balance between man and desert is."

"Amen to that."

We raise our beer and take a drink.

"Alright then, tell me how you manage not to turn into a Yankee yourself then."

We end up talking for an hour or so. I mostly listen and let him tell me what he wants me to say. As the sun lowers, he gets a phone call. His wife. He excuses himself and answers. It's hard to catch what they are talking about precisely but dinner was definitely involved. It is quite complicated to gauge the type of relation he and his wife entertain. He is clearly reserved but he could be because it is quite an uncomfortable situation with me in the room. At some point, he blushes out of reason which can be caused by one of two things: a reproach—which he cannot answer in front of me—or a comment of a more carnal nature. I cannot tell which though. You will be surprised to know how repressed anger and arousal show in a very similar way on one's face. Mrs. Washington must be listening to the call so I will need to ask her which one it was. In my line of work, it is always important to understand the relations at work in a couple.

"I'm gonna need to hang up, honey. I'm with Jerry's friend... Yeah, the insurance adviser... Oh yeah, stand-up guy. Nothing like Jerry..."

He winks and smiles at me. A wide and warm smile.

"Well, I'll ask him... Alright, see you in a few... Bye."

He hangs up and gets up. I follow his example.

"Are you free for dinner, Mr. Graham?"

"Well, I am, actually, but I wouldn't want to impose."

"Nonsense. Plus, it's my wife who asked and, trust me on that one, you don't want to get on her bad side"

This big smile again. I smile back

"I trust you, that sounds pretty bad."

"You see the thing is, my in-laws are in town and 'Don Lopez' invited himself for dinner. You'd be a very welcome presence to lighten the mood."

He grabs a post-it and writes something on it.

"So 'Don Lopez' isn't the funniest of fellows, right?"

“Let’s just say that he’s always a bit judgmental, especially of me because I’ve ‘stolen his one little girl.’ Don’t worry though, he’s an interesting guy. I’m sure he’ll like you. He likes true people, and you, my friend, strike me as a very honest person.”

“Alright then, count me in.”

He hands me the post-it.

“Great! Meet us there at eight. You’ll need to ring the buzzer; security will let you in. And maybe we can agree on a contract over an after-dinner drink.”

We greet goodbye, shake hands, and his secretary shows me out. After a thirty minutes’ drive, I’m back at the hideout: a small house in a suburban neighbourhood. It was not a brand-new house, but it was not in ruins either. I had to sleep in the sewers once, so it’s quite fine in comparison. Emily is waiting for me. She is my partner. She is the one who took care of Campbell’s former adviser and organised the robbery. We were abducted at age twelve by the same organisation and we were trained together to become ‘super-spies.’ In reality, we were their own personal assassins, numbed by years of brainwashing. They made weapons out of us, or more like bullets to be shot out of their barrel. But they did not take into account that Emily and I made each other smarter. We understood that we were doing more evil than good. We broke out together. We were given codenames back then, and we could not be sure that the other was not trying to give the first away, so I remember having an idea: tell each other’s real name as a gesture of trust. I could not act on that idea for it was the first time I realised that I had forgotten what my name actually was.

As I get out of the car, Emily gets up from the stairs of the porch. I ask:

“What do you think about the wife?”

“I think she loves him. I’m not so sure about him though, he was not as expressive as her. But then again...”

“...probably because I was in the room.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“So, it was a sexual comment she made at some point?”

“Yes, very sexual. And they’re five years into their marriage. You were not sure whether it was that or an insufferable comment, were you?”

“Yep.”

We enter the house. The living room had been turned into a small operation centre where several powerful laptops were running constantly to track the Campbells and the Lopezes, as well as many boxes containing all the equipment we could possibly need. This was the advantage of having a reasonably big house as a hideout: we did not have to limit the equipment to the bare necessary. Washington was sitting on the couch, sipping a coffee.

“Good job on getting invited to dinner, Agent Williams, I didn’t expect it to be so easy.”

You must think I’m crazy saying that I don’t know my name when she keeps calling me agent Williams, but Matthew Williams is yet another alias. It was the name I wore for several missions—including the very first one—for the organisation Emily and I used to work for. As I am sure you guessed, Emily Smith is not her real name either. We were asked to form those fake identities from a list of first and last names that are most common in England, where the aforementioned first mission took place. Emily and I both come from there. At least, I come from there, *that* I know, but Emily never actually told me. However, I do remember her talking with a slight Southern English accent when we first met. Now, I do not think that either of us knows what our accent truly is, we instinctively adapt to the place and people around us. Washington continues:

“And the fact that Miguel Lopez will be there is an added bonus. Of course, I’m sure you understood that we made sure the Lopezes were in town when we sent you here. I think that all three of us know that we do not deal with luck in our line of work.”

“Next time, I would be grateful if you keep your unconstructive comments to yourself while my cover’s on the line.”

“I know what I’m doing, Agent Williams. This was to put you to the test. If this mission is going on smoothly, in higher stake operations, both you and I could be under a lot of stress—don’t you think that handlers are under less pressure because they are not in the field—and in those situations our words might overcome our reasoned thoughts.”

“Not from me, and neither from Emily. Because we are professionals and I would expect as much from our handler.”

“I know that you followed a much more thorough training than the one our agents usually do, but—if not you two—I am only human. And I know my limitations. Do you?”

“Your informants were wrong, drastically. Campbell was not the man I have been told he was.”

“Once again, agent, I wanted to test your reaction in the face of adversity. I’ll have you know that my informants are very competent, and they made a perfectly accurate profile of the Campbells. Things do not always go as planned. I needed to see how you would respond to unfortunate changes, just like I was the one to call the cops on your perfectly executed robbery, Agent Smith.”

Emily and I exchange a look. Mrs. Washington continues:

“Do understand that this entire mission is a way to evaluate you, agents. For any other recruit, this ‘red test’ is a way to make sure they’re capable of pulling the trigger when the time comes. But we already are confident about your ability to do that, so what we want to know is how good you really are. Actually, given your very peculiar background, be aware that I, my superiors and every available resource will be keeping a close eye on you until we can be certain of your allegiance. And keep in mind that we *will* be recording your every move as possible leverage if you were to betray us. Clear?”

Emily answers for both of us:

“Crystal.”

“Great. Now, Agent Smith, I cannot validate your ‘red test’ over the assassination of Campbell’s former adviser. Don’t get me wrong, I was most pleasantly surprised by the way you handled it—I’m not used to rookie agents showing such subtlety. However, I’d like to see how you handle pressure on the field. Agent Williams, you’ll only have to take care of Tia and Jason Campbell. Miguel Lopez is all yours, agent Smith. Questions?”

“Is there some additional assignment while we’re inside?”

“No, we have all the information we need on the Lopez organization thanks to an inside informant.”

“What about security? They’ll most probably stand in our way.”

“Their security is only composed of cartel members. Any casualty on their part is more than acceptable to us, in fact it is an agreeable bonus.”

I exchange a look with Emily, she nods slightly.

“All good on our side.”

“You’ll find the blueprints of the house on this laptop, as well as every other resource you might need. I’ll leave you to prepare.”

As eight approaches quickly, we select our weapons, grab the laptop and go on our way to the Campbells' house. Emily studies the blueprint, focusing on the dining hall. After checking that the wire under my shirt is turned off, I sign Emily to do the same. She nods and I ask:

"What have you found on Washington's ulterior motives?"

Here is the state of things: Washington thinks she is testing us, which is ridiculous because we're the best agents she'd ever work with and we know that. Now, she wants to have us think that she is gauging whether she can trust us or not, but if we were undercover agents working for a rival agency, she would never know it until it was too late. In reality, we are the ones testing her and her organisation. We did not leave our previous employer to work for someone worse; so we do want to know whether they are working towards something we believe in or not. Emily says:

"I know what Washington's superiors hope for, but you first. Anything on the informant?"

"I had a little talk with a high-ranking member of Lopez's Cartel. Sergio, the older son and Tia's only sibling, was supposed to take over his father's empire when he retires. However, he is an uninteresting party boy, not involved at all in his father's bidding. He is not a good businessman nor a good drug dealer, so he would definitely not make a good drug-lord. Tia, on the other hand, is smart, hardworking and Miguel's favourite. When word got out that he was training her to take over, Sergio got very upset. 'Beating someone to death' upset. I think Washington promised the throne to Sergio, but I don't know to what end."

"I do and it makes more sense now that I know that Sergio is the inside guy. He's going to cover the assassination. They'll make it pass as an attack from a rival cartel and declare a war on them. From what I got, Mrs. Washington's organisation is going to support him in bringing down the other cartel. What I think is that, once the Lopez cartel is weakened from the gang war and Sergio's horrible management, Washington has the order to take it down too."

"Dismantle two major cartels operating in the US at once."

"Pretty smart indeed."

I take a second to think, then say:

"I think it's worth the try. Working with them I mean."

"It's not like we expect them to be the freaking Care Bears. But they seem good enough. If they turn out not to be then we'll leave. We did it once; we can do it again. If we work together, nobody can stop us anyway."

She smiles at me. I realise just now how much I enjoy working with Emily. I never doubt that she has my back and no one else can do a better job than her. The people who trained us used to think that a strong relationship with your partner was a synonym of danger because when you care too much about someone you risk putting them ahead of the mission. I think they were wrong. It is this bond with Emily that makes me such a good agent. I always know that; no matter the difficulties she may encounter, she will pull through. How many times did I put my life on the line knowing that she got me covered. I am also just realising that she is the only person I can call my friend. The only one I could ever call my friend. *My* friend. I don't even know who I am. The urge to ask her if she remembers her real name rises in me again but when I open my mouth, only those words come out:

"Sounds like a good plan."

"Speaking of, let's review our plan of action for today."

Our plan is quite straightforward, and the few miles left between us and the villa are more than enough to cover it a couple of times and make sure we leave out no loose ends. By the time we catch sight of the property, a moonless night has replaced the burning day. Even

in the dark, it stands out from the surrounding desert: first because it is built on a hill overlooking the whole valley and second because of the trees inside of its embrace—which are the sole representatives of vegetation in a twenty miles radius. Before we get too close, I stop the car by the roadside. We turn our wires back on and check in with Mrs. Washington. Emily steps out of the car, stretches and goes to hide in the trunk with our guns. It is a risk for the guards could search it, but we know from the security blueprints and the notes of the informant that there should be only one guard operating the gate. If he were to open the trunk, Emily will drop him dead before he realises what is happening. Of course, Don's Lopez presence could mean reinforced security at the front gate, but the odds are in our favour.

Once Emily is in position, I resume my journey to the house and stop once I find myself in front of the huge handcrafted gates. I get out of the car and ring the buzzer. The man at the other end of the line has a strong Mexican accent:

“State your name.”

“I'm Mr. Graham. I am expected for dinner.”

“Right. Step away from the car.”

The doors open wide and a Mexican man—with a side weapon holstered against his leg—gets out of a small cabin a few yards ahead and approaches me.

“I'll have to pat you down and check your car before I can let you come in.”

We expected a body search; that's why I left my gun with Emily in the trunk.

“Of course, go ahead.”

He checks my suit for a gun and, once satisfied, turns a small flashlight on and gives a quick look inside the car through the windows. I feel a small sense of relief when he turns the flashlight off and heads back toward me. He only delayed his death by a few minutes but I prefer when things go smoothly.

“You can drive in. Señora Campbell invites you to park right in front of the house.”

“Thank you.”

I get back in the car and drive up the sinuous alleyway. Once I reach a spot concealed from both the house and the cabin—a spot that Emily and I agreed on during our planning—I stop again and go open the trunk to let her out. She hands me my nine millimetre which is equipped with a silencer. She checks one more time that the safety of her own gun is off, nods at me, and fades into the vegetation of the estate's garden, heading back towards the cabin. After holstering the pistol, I jump back in and follow the path to the mansion. It is as big as I expected. I park before the house as indicated. A guard is posted at the front door and opens it for me. From his clothing—much classier and more expensive than the gate guard's—I infer that he belongs to Miguel Lopez's personal watch. Inside I am led by a servant to the drawing-room where the three targets await me quietly. Jason Campbell introduces me to the group and offers me a drink. He and his wife make most of the conversation, asking me questions and using my answers to tell their own stories. They seem quite happy to have me as a conversation starter. And they do seem to be very much in love by the way they watch and listen to the other. Miguel Lopez, on the other hand, is far less talkative, only intervening to ask further questions about me or my 'business endeavours'—small questions but nevertheless very pertinent. I can see that he is gauging me with every word I speak and every move I make. He clearly is a very clever person.

After a while, one of the servants announces that the dinner is served and so we move on to the dining hall. I sit in front of Jason, with Tia at the right end of the table and Miguel at the left end. There are three members of the Don's security with us: one by the door behind me, one by the window behind Tia and one a few steps behind Miguel. During the starters, Mrs. Washington indicates to me that Emily has cleared the garden-grounds. Soon after, the house-staff clears the table and brings the main dish. By now Miguel talks a bit more and starts

to comment on this and that. I make a few jokes that get him to laugh. At some point, he even apologises for having me patted down, saying it is a 'necessary evil' in his line of work. While the dessert is taken away and the coffee poured, I hear Mrs. Washington's voice in my ear-piece:

"The rest of the mansion is cleared. Smith is in position."

I take a few deep breaths to calm my heartbeat; though I instinctively conceal it. Jason is speaking about his robbed shop; his wife and father-in-law are listening with attention. The last servant leaves the room, closing the door to the kitchen behind him. I say loudly enough:

"You take the one by the door, I'll take care of the other two."

The three of them turn towards me, bewildered. I look at them undisturbed. The guards seem confused but do not move. I surprise myself with an emphatic British accent. Of course, it is the accent I used to have before I underwent my training but it is no longer natural to me. I think I enjoy the sense of incomprehension that goes with this sudden change. As I slowly get up and adjust my jacket, I say:

"Sorry, I wasn't talking to you."

I reach for my gun; aim; shoot. The guard by the window falls to the ground. Emily bursts out of the open corridor on my right and shoots down the guard by the door. Before he can reach his own gun, I shoot the one behind Miguel Lopez. The former tries to get up as fast as he can and reveals a silver Desert Eagle in his right hand. Emily is faster. He falls down on the table, spilling coffee all over, dropped dead. Tia quickly follows as I shoot a third bullet through her head. I turn towards my next and last target, Jason, and aim the gun at him.

A sudden sense of doubt takes over me. He looks at me, petrified, not understanding what is going on. He never asked for this. He merely fell in love with the wrong woman; married into the wrong family; stumbled upon the wrong agents. He is going to be yet another casualty in our wake. In my wake. Emily and I, we left our previous organisation because we were asked to do jobs just like this one, with casualties just like Jason. There too, they convinced us that it was for the greater good. It is all an endless circle, is it not? And it hits me. This is the reason why they made us forget our names back there. Without a name, I have no identity. Without an identity, I am no one. If I am no one, I do not have to endure the remorse that comes with the jobs. For the first time, I embrace this emptiness. I am not agent Matthew Williams; I am just nameless. Inside the barrel, gunpowder heats up to more than one-thousand Fahrenheit when ignited, propelling the bullet out of the suppressor in a loud silence. Yet, the trigger—on which my finger is pressed—never felt so cold.