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Holden Holden: OK, so, I'm calling. "Hey, my name's Holden and I, I, you know, I had some fraud." They're like, "OK, OK. Let me look up your account. What's your last name?" "It's Holden. It's H-O-L-D-E-N." "OK, what's your first name?" "Well, it's also Holden. It's spelled the same way." "Oh, OK. Sorry. What's your last name?" "It's—no, they're both Holden. They're spelled the same way. It's H-O-L-D-E-N." "Oh, OK, OK. I see that now."

[Music]

Giri Nathan: I'm Giri Nathan.

Samer Kalaf: And I'm Samer Kalaf.

Giri: And this is Namedropping, a show about having to pull out your ID to prove that your name is real.

Samer: So back when we announced Namedropping on the post on Defector, there were a lot of comments. They were all supportive, excited for the show—but one comment stood out in particular. It was from the handle "Holdensquared," and it read, "My first and last names are both Holden. Thank you for letting me be your first guest."

Giri: So we reached out to Holden, and he actually did want to show up and talk to us for our podcast. And we had a great conversation about how he got his name, the very common and obvious jokes and little interactions that he has over and over throughout his life, and how that's sort of shaped his sensibility and sense of self.

[music]

Giri: Glad to have you on the show. Also, Holden Holden is a Defector subscriber, so, you know, really living the dream here.

Holden: I almost wore the shirt, but I thought that would be too on the nose.

Giri: So, this is going to mostly be for us and less so for the listeners, but if you could hold up an ID, or something just to confirm that your name is Holden twice. If you have anything handy.

Holden: Yeah. What about a COVID vax card? Is that topical?

Samer: Yeah. If it's good enough for bars, it's good for us.

[holds up vax card]

Samer: OK. Holden Holden is vaccinated and has received his booster.

Holden: Ready to go. Hot vax winter. [laughter]

Giri: Do you have a middle name?

Holden: I have two middle names, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Neither of them mean anything. The origin of Holden Holden is not that interesting. I don't know a ton about my dad's side of the family and my mother is what I would probably call an unreliable narrator. So I have pieces of origin story that sort of formed into this picture. So, my mother's father, his name is something normal like Saul. But he went by—people call them Holden, his last name, affectionately, I guess. He died a month before I was born. So in memoriam, I guess, my first name is Holden. Now, what happens next is confusing to me, because my mom knew her last name was also Holden. And so I don't know if she planned to marry my dad, and then it would change just sort of naturally. They did not get married, so it sort of stayed the same.

There is another explanation: that she thought "Holden [REDACTED] Holden" looked nice written out on paper, which is fine for a reason to name someone something. She should not be blamed that, after the age of 13, I would never write my full name on paper again in my life. So yeah, the origins are hasty, I guess, of Holden Holden.

Giri: Do you ever sign your name with the middle names, or is it just straight up Holden and then Holden again?

Holden: It's only Holden Holden because I never learned how to make a cursive capital G, or at least I don't remember how to.

Giri: Oh, that's a fun one. That's the only one I like.

Holden: It's like a loop, probably? Yeah. But the best part about—I don't know what the good part of a signature is—but the two Holdens are never the same. You think it would be very easy to just do one then the other, but I guess I get bored by the second one and then I mix it all up and I try and make the H-O-L interesting.

Samer: Fatigue sets in after the first Holden.

Holden: Yeah, right. I'm just so tired.

Samer: Do you remember the first time that the name felt more like an obstacle to you or something that people reacted to in a way that you weren't expecting?

Holden: You get a lot of *Catcher In The Rye* references, just because that's the only Holden people might know casually. But my first memory of being like "This is a weird name" comes from elementary school, in like third grade. And I remember I transferred to a new school, and

there was a student named Francesco Francesco Francesco. Everyone in the class was very excited that there was another person who had what they may have thought was a problem. But yeah, that was the first time I was like, "Oh, people are named Sarah and Mike."

Giri: Did you feel outdone by Francesco cubed?

Holden: Yeah, dude, absolutely stole my thunder. What are we doing here? Come on.

Giri: Do you guys keep in touch?

Holden: No, no. I transferred schools probably like six times. So I don't remember any person from that time period.

Giri: Got it. I guess because you transferred so much, you were constantly in a position of re-introducing yourself as Holden Holden.

Holden: Yeah. That was sort of a foundational time for—and really having the name Holden Holden, in general, is a very good icebreaker. But the thing about icebreakers is you have to want to be the one to initiate conversation. And so when someone finds out that you have this fact about you, you will have to talk about it. And sometimes in my life I would get mad—or like, not mad, but like, "Oh my God, do we really have to go through this again?" Like exasperated. Yeah. At this point I have come to terms with it. It's inevitable, that conversation, so I might as well enjoy it. I think it was, again, foundational for a lot of things I'm interested in now. I'm interested in comedy. I always wanted to be a game show host. So I think this forced spotlight definitely left an impression on the type of future and, I guess, present that I'm in now. I'm 32, I'm not a game show host yet. But maybe one day.

Giri: There's still time.

Samer: *Jeopardy!* is still looking.

Holden: There's still time. There's this theory called nominative determinism. So a great present-day example is like Usain Bolt, right? He's real fast, and he has the last name Bolt. But then there's a bunch of smaller examples. You know, there's like a judge whose last name is Judge or a lawyer whose last name is Law. But when I found out about that theory, I was like, "Fuck yeah, destiny has nothing on me. I can do whatever I want."

Giri: Wasn't there a very famous lawyer named, like, Learned Hand? Or something like that?

Holden: Ooh, that's a good one.

Giri: He was involved in jurisprudence or something.

Holden: Or a dentist named Smiley.

Samer: Yeah. Former judge of the U.S. District Court for New York, Billings Learned Hand.

Holden: Wow. That's—you gotta be a lawyer. What else can you do?

Giri: I'm vaguely familiar with the idea of a name as an icebreaker, less so than you. But I think the frustrating thing there is that the conversation inevitably goes down like a few well-trodden paths and you kind of know—it's not really a pick-your-own-adventure. You just kinda know where it's going. Can you walk me through the kinds of obvious jokes or questions that people make or ask?

Holden: Yeah. Well, in middle school, I remember this girl who—my sole relationship with her was that she would find me in the halls, and she would run up and grab me and say that she was holding Holden Holden. Which, I don't remember anything else about that girl, so I'm not sure about the impact. But yeah, it's always, you know, "Are you holding on?" Uh, a lot of dick jokes, um—depending on the age of the crowd, a couple of drug references, like, "Are you holding?" That is something people might've said in the '90s, maybe. And then—I don't know, those are probably the main ones. Those are the ones that happen. The fun ones are when you encounter a person—I work in tech, so names are not always Mike or Sarah. And it's fun when you can sort of have that camaraderie over the shared experience of an annoyance. That is an introduction conversation, but those are probably the main ones, for better or worse. There is a lack of creativity. There's only so much you can do with the verb "hold," and I think people sort of just latch on to that.

Samer: Have there ever been times where you just got sick of it, basically?

Holden: People ask me sometimes, you know, why not just go by [REDACTED], which is a pretty normal name, I guess. And in college, I considered it—you know, trying to reinvent myself as a 19-year-old or whatever, and I was sort of sick of being what I saw as a center of—I was very egotistical [laughs]—but I sort of thought like I was this special person because I had been dealt this hand. I think now, at least on some of the subreddits I read, it's referred to as "main character syndrome," where you sort of feel like people who are in your life are—maybe their actions are dependent on the types of things that you do. And it's also maybe solipsism in a way. But I did always feel a sort of, "Oh, by default, I have something interesting to say because of my name." And then as you get older, that perspective shifted to, "Oh, I have an interesting name. So I should try to have something interesting to say." The joy is then that the internet, you sort of can be authentically anonymous. Like, I can be Holden Holden on the internet and no one really cares. And I've also learned that no one gives a shit about me, so I can be like—I am not this special person, I'm the same as anyone else, and I just happen to have this strange label. It's weird culturally, too, right? Because in the Middle East, of course, you see Mohamed Mohamed very frequently, or even Mohamed Mohamed Mohamed. So for people who are not native to the United States, it is not always a shock. There are people in my company who have the same first and last name—we have a group together and there's like a couple of hundred

people. So it is nice to have that reminder that it is not all that different. Although it does make for, like I said, it's a great ice breaker, if you are in the mood to break the ice.

[House ad] Holden: Hello, and thanks for listening. My name is Holden Holden, and I'm a Defector subscriber. It's the easiest way to make fun of Drew Magary. I know he reads all those comments. If you want to support Defector and get your first month for 99 cents, go to defector.com/namedropping.

[music]

Giri: Do you feel like a special kinship with your grandfather, twice over?

Holden: Hmm. I was raised Mormon, and genealogy and research and your family tree are pastimes, I guess, in the Mormon community. In part, so they can find people who are unbaptized and then baptize them into Mormonism posthumously. But I don't put a lot of stake into personal history or lineage, really. I don't intend on having kids. I have a younger brother who has a normal name. I also do not think he is having children, so for all intents and purposes, the Holden bloodline ends here, and that doesn't really bother me either. It's true that the Holden name—I mean, William Holden was accomplished, and there were Holdens in the Civil War and stuff, and that can be traced—but that doesn't mean a ton to me, because we've sort of in spite or despite of all those achievements, we're still sort of in the place that we are now. So I'd rather, I guess, try and focus on maybe improving the present. That sounds very pretentious, but yeah, not a lot of, uh, familial connection for me.

Giri: Is there anything particular in your life that kind of led you to that view, that made you see that as less of an important organizing principle for your life?

Holden: Yeah, maybe. I mean, maybe. Like I said, I didn't know my dad too well. I don't know anything about his side of the family. Actually I just did a 23andMe, and I'm awaiting the results to get a cursory idea of what those people were like. So there's 50% right there. And then on the family I do know about, they lived in Florida for most of my childhood and where we lived in Pennsylvania, and so the physical separation was a factor. We didn't—boy, my mother was a—despite being raised Mormon, she also had jobs like working in the carnival, so I moved around a lot. So that sort of lack of a fixed point maybe contributed to no long-lasting relationships, whether it's with family or with others. And then maybe that viewpoint sort of cascaded into what it is now. That's my first guess. I worked at a carnival too, actually. That was my first job when I was seven. I did the duck pond. Maybe you're familiar with it.

Samer: Yeah, with the prize.

Giri: Did you guys work together?

Holden: Um, no. Well, at the same carnival, but not like—I ran the process of picking up ducks by myself. [laughter]

Samer: Was there a secret to the duck pond game?

Holden: Uh, am I going to get sued?

Samer: Oh yeah, I guess I don't know if you can reveal that.

Giri: Did you sign an NDA? How long is that binding? Big Carnival is gonna come after our podcast.

Holden: Yeah, I think we're past the statute of limitations for carnie rules. At least at the one I ran, it was numbers one through six on the bottom. Six was the highest prize and one was like a, whatever, lollipop. There were probably fewer sixes than ones, I guess is the secret.

Samer: I guess that's not actionable.

Holden: Yeah, no one can come after me for that.

Giri: Did you ever attempt to give yourself a nickname, or were you ever stuck with one by someone else?

Holden: Definitely then second. Did I ever try? There were a couple of teachers in my middle school who were very into nicknames, like to the point where they would not learn the real names of students. And instead, on the first day of class, he would look at you and he would be like, "OK, I'm calling you whatever." Then he put that on a laminated sheet of paper and then you tape it to the front of your desk. And in that class, that's your name for the whole year. So he gave me the nickname Cosmo. My hair was—well, you can't really—my hair was longer at the time. Assumingly about Kramer. Maybe personality-wise too, that had something to do with it. So I kind of liked that. The teacher was the only person to do that. I can pretty successfully say it didn't stick, but there was another teacher in middle school who started calling me "Holden Squared," and people still do that to this day. I guess that's a nickname. It's like just a different way to say Holden.

Giri: I think that it counts.

Holden: Yeah. So that one has some heft, some long-lasting.

Giri: How often do you encounter a situation where people think you're messing with them?

Holden: Hmm. Yeah. At one point we had a substitute teacher, and I had the reputation of a prankster, I guess, but she was taking roll. So I was like, "My name's Holden Holden." And she said, "No, that can't be true. What's your real name?" And the rest of the class was, for one of the few times, very supportive of me and like, "No, that's his real name." She sent me to the

principal's office because she did not believe me. And so I go to the office and the secretary was like, "OK, what'd you do?" And I was like, "I told her about my name." [laughter]

Giri: "I responded to roll call."

Holden: One time at a previous job, we had an accountant that just refused to believe me. And so on my paychecks, she put [REDACTED], because that was the choice that she made, which was not that big of a deal at the time. When it came to filing taxes, though, the IRS is very particular that your name needs to match. Even after—I worked there for two and a half years or two years. Never once, just kept ... so that was, that was frustrating.

Giri: Did you ever go back and complain? Did you figure out what was the source of her resistance?

Holden: Oh, I should've asked. There was a language barrier, and so maybe that had something to do with it. But the gist of the conversation would be like, "Hey, I really need you to put Holden on the paychecks," and then she would respond to that in an email chain, like, "OK, yeah, I'll make that change." And then, two years of really just that same conversation over and over.

[laughter]

Giri: Just unable to accept it in her head.

Holden: Yeah. Just refused saying this. "This can't be."

Samer: That kind of leads to a question I had, which was how your name does versus technology. Like, are there online forms or something else that you're doing through some kind of form where it would just reject your name?

Holden: Yeah, dude. Forms do not like duplicate entries. If I'm applying for like a loan, I have to use my full name. They do not accept two middle names. So, in many online databases, I'm just Holden [REDACTED] Holden. Yeah, I have a lot of trouble sometimes, which is great. I mean, that's a lot of fun.

[laughter]

Giri: Yeah, any time I'm filling out a form on the internet, I just wish it took more time and required more work for me.

Holden: Yep, give me more forms.

Giri: What was kind of the highest-stakes version of that? It sounds like getting a loan would have been a pain.

Holden: Yeah. Yeah. And the paychecks and the IRS was a big one. I mean, no one ever wants to call the IRS, but that took probably a few—actually, I thought I was pretty impervious to things like identity fraud. 'Cause I thought that the effort needed to sort of become a Holden Holden was not worth whatever payoff that the person got. But a week ago, my debit card got stolen in, like, Greece. So I once again am reminded that I am not special. But that was always like a sort of armor I thought I had. But as far as the other way around where it was challenging, yeah. I guess dealing with anything with money, and when you have to call someone to explain, and provide photo proof, is sort of disheartening in a way that is hard to explain.

Samer: We've kind of talked about the big-stakes difficulties, but are there any other small-stakes annoyances that happen in your day-to-day life that we haven't asked about?

Holden: Hmm. Well, you know, at this point, I sort of enjoy the time between handing someone identification and then—you can sort of see the question forming. Sometimes they don't give a shit.

Giri: You live for the thrill of handing someone your ID.

Holden: Yeah. Especially in the pandemic, this is the only enjoyment I get. But I work in tech, so I spend a lot of my time online and in a sort of equivalent of Slack. And it does get some questioning or some confusion if I'm meeting someone for the first time. They're like, "Oh, it looks like there's an error in your username. Or like, "Oh, you filled out this form incorrectly. Did you mean to put something else there?" And so those can be frustrating. 'Cause when people assume like I've made a mistake, as opposed to just like—listen, this is the person that I am.

Samer: Yeah, I was kind of wondering about that. 'Cause I feel like gradually over time, it might get irritating, where everybody always thinks you're wrong about this one thing where you know that you're absolutely correct.

Holden: Yeah, and it's nice. Maybe that's true, because it is sort of one of the few things that I feel very confident about, that I am accurate on.

Giri: You're a real-world authority on the subject.

Holden: Yeah, my claim to fame. Um, but you know, like I said, it's hard to—there's no real point in getting mad anymore. No one really benefits from that kind of reaction. Then I'll just dwell on it for the rest of the day, like, "Oh, they were just asking an innocent question and here I am, being an asshole about it." So I try and take it in stride at this point. Unless you go out of your way to sort of—and there have been people who like, I can remember high-school bullies and the "Holden my dick" line was pretty constant throughout my teenage years. And that gets old, you know. But now, 20 years out of high school or whatever it is, no one really treats you like that as an adult, fortunately.

[music]

Giri: We got to some of these already, but we wanted to play a little game that we play with our guests, where we ask you how you introduce yourself in various situations.

Holden: You need a host?

[laughter]

Giri: Yeah. You can be the host and the respondent. Let's say you walk into the bank and they ask you what your name is.

Holden: OK. Yeah. "So my first name is Holden. It's H-O-L-D-E-N. And then my last name is also Holden, spelled the same way." And then, so they're writing, or they're like typing in, "OK, H-O-L-D-E-N," and then it's The Look. [laughter] And then they say, "Oh, that's interesting," or, "Oh, all right, hang on." I spell it out the first time so that the second time is maybe less of a shock.

Samer: Yeah, it feels like you're really laying down the groundwork to cushion their shock there.

Holden: I make it easy for people.

Giri: Let's say you are on the phone trying to get some customer service.

Holden: Mmm, I just went through this with the fraud, and it was challenging because they—OK, so, I'm calling. "Hey, my name's Holden and I, I, you know, I had some fraud." They're like, "OK, OK. Let me look up your account. What's your last name?" "It's Holden. It's H-O-L-D-E-N." "OK, what's your first name?" "Well, it's also Holden. It's spelled the same way." "Oh, OK. Sorry. What's your last name?" "It's—no, they're both Holden. They're spelled the same way. It's H-O-L-D-E-N." "Oh, OK, OK. I see that now."

Samer: Damn.

Giri: Kind of like a "Who's On First."

Holden. Mhm. But it's always Holden on first.

Samer: This kind of leads to a minor deviation, but do you get people spelling it, or misspelling it all the time?

Holden: A lot of "Holdon," just because that's something people can grasp. But other than that, there's been a shift as I get older, where people sort of accept it more easily, and maybe who knows what that says about anything. But it has been, and there have been less, or maybe it's because I've been in the house for two years. There have been fewer questions.

Giri: Is that when the turning point was, somewhere around like March 2020?

[laughter]

Holden: The pandemic? Yeah, weirdly, right around March.

Samer: So you're meeting a friend of a friend.

Holden: So it depends. I have a couple friends who really, who really relish this moment. We'll be at a restaurant or something, and the waiter will be like, "OK, which one of you is Smith? Which one of you is Holden?" And then they'll look. And I have a very specific buddy I'm thinking of who'll just be like, "Oh OK, ask him his first name. Ask him his first name. Show him the ID, pull out the ID." Or they'll introduce me and be like, "Hey Holden, this is Michelle." And she'll be like, "Oh, Holden. That's a cool name." And then the friend will be like, "Ask him what his last name is. Show her the ID." [laughter] So that's—I mean, is that fun? Yeah, it's fun sometimes.

Samer: Yeah. As long as it's not consistently aggravating you, I think you can make your judgment.

Giri: Let's say you are on a date.

Holden: Hmm. I've been with the same partner for six years, so it's been a little while, but it is true that dating before was not through an app. So it would be something like—well, they usually know. Like, it would be weird if they didn't know, and then we get to our first one-on-one conversation, but there have been times when people would think I'm joking the first time I say it. And then you get into a more maybe intimate setting, or like you're talking one-on-one and wherever, and it comes up otherwise, and they'd be like, "Wait, wait. I always thought you were kidding. Your first and last names are the same?" And then you pull out the ID, and then it's fun for everybody.

Giri: So basically there's been like this unknown period of time where they just thought you were playing them. It could have been weeks, months.

Holden: They had no clue who I was. Yeah. They agree to meet me at a restaurant, despite not knowing my true identity. [laughter]

[music]

Giri: Thank you so much for coming on.

Samer: Yeah, thank you.

Holden: No, it's been fantastic. I don't talk about it too often in-depth like this. 'Cause most people don't care. But it has been—I have learned things about myself, too. So thank you for the opportunity.

Samer: Thanks for listening to Namedropping. You can email us at namedropping@defector.com.

Giri: This podcast was produced by Alex Sujong Laughlin. Thanks to projects editor Justin Ellis and editor-in-chief Tom Ley, and the rest of the Defector staff.

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