

“Becoming May”
by May Cotton © 2014, 2021

By the time I was born in late 1950, my mother had already succumbed to the disease we now call genealogy. After wounding her mother-in-law two years earlier with maternal-line names for my brother, she sought to sow a little peace by naming me after two aunts, one from each side of the family. So it was that I became saddled with the name Mary Anne.

My father’s Aunt Anna was pleased and doted on me as I was growing up, just as she had doted on my father. Beginning before I could read, she showered me with postcards of cats dressed as girls and boys doing very human things like making trouble in the classroom, creating chaos in the kitchen, or teasing the girl cats with spiders and snakes. I adored the pictures and saved every last one of them. Eventually Aunt Anna gave me the rest of the set when she deemed me too old to continue receiving them in the mail.

The post cards were replaced by cards and letters between us as I responded to her little gifts of dollar bills in holiday cards, and when I graduated from high school, she invited me to visit her in Ohio. I was astonished to be served lunch by a uniformed maid in my Aunt’s high rise apartment, and delighted after we ate, when she showered me with little gifts from her jewelry box. Aunt Anna was so pleased with me, she left me a thousand dollars in her will; she died in 1972, shortly after I was married.

I never knew what Aunt Mary thought about my being given her name — she died before I was old enough to know her as anything other than the name of one of my mother’s many aunts.

Regrettably, my mother felt guilty about not giving me a middle name, so when she was approached by the hospital scribe who wrote out my official birth certificate, she broke Maryanne into two words so it would seem as if I had a middle name. Thus began my quest to either learn how to live with this name, or to find one that fit me better.

It seemed like every person who saw my name in writing wanted to call me Mary, because as soon as they saw the space they stopped reading. Mary was a very common name in those days, to the point that I found I had to defend myself against being mistaken for a Catholic, especially since my spelling of ‘Anne’ was considered Catholic as well. My father had been raised by Catholic-hating Episcopalians, so there was additional in-law wrath for my mother to face.

I despised the name ‘Mary’; ‘Anne’ wasn’t quite so bad — it meant ‘grace,’ which was actually rather appealing. But thanks to the seminary a mile from our neighborhood, which supplied our church with over-educated Sunday School teachers, I soon learned that ‘Mary’ means ‘bitter’ as it is a diminutive of ‘Miriam,’ which means ‘bitter herb.’

My mother had unwittingly dubbed me ‘Bitter Grace,’

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I fought mightily with the powers-that-be to call me Mary Anne instead of merely Mary. There were teachers and scout leaders, nurses and camp counselors to correct; I lost track of how many times I said firmly and clearly, “My name is *Mary Anne!* In tenth grade I began experimenting with a new way of writing it. I tried it as one word — *MaryAnne*. It just didn’t feel right and I quickly went back to writing it as two words. That summer I’d spent a week at

Girl Scout camp being called ‘Cricket.’ The following summer I called myself Randi at the state-wide church camp, but was called out by an adult from my local congregation who knew me as Mary Anne.

Along the way I grew sadder and more depressed. On road trips when we stopped for gas, I perused displays of key chains and bicycle license plates, cheesy souvenirs and other memorabilia personalized with first names. Never did I find Mary Anne among the selections. Or, if I did find a Maryann, it lacked the E, and I didn’t want it. Years later, when I bought a keychain bearing MARYANNE as one word, the way I’d tried writing it in tenth grade, my mother was surprised — she thought I given up my birth name entirely. I guess she didn’t know May wasn’t my legal name.

By the end of my 13 years in the Denver Public School, having begun with kindergarten in 1955, all the teachers knew me as Mary Anne, and all the students did too. In junior high I made a friend who insisted on calling me Mary. Many years later I finally caught on to the fact that she was retaliating for my failure to call her Paddy, the nickname she earned as a baby from the padding sound she made when she slapped her fat little feet against the floor. Instead I always called her Claire, her birth name, of which I was jealous because I thought was so elegantly beautiful.

Be that as it may (yes, pun intended), I went off to college being called Mary Anne, and I came away with the name May.

I was called May by Mo, the first man I dated seriously. He was trying to prepare me for going home with him to Saudi Arabia where I would be the first of his four wives. In Mo’s Bedouin culture, women did not have three-syllable names, so Mary Anne just wasn’t going to work. Given the task of shortening my name, Mo took to calling me May, and May I became.

First my college friends began calling me May. Later, when I moved to California in 1981, it only took a couple of days of being back to Mary Anne before I began telling everyone to call me May. Finally, on May 1, 1996, I made it official — after a fashion — by changing my name at the Social Security Office. Later I changed it on my drivers license as well. The bank accounts followed. By the time I left California in 2007, there was only one person there who remembered me as Mary Anne.

I was thrilled when people said things to me like, “May Cotton is such a beautiful name.” Or, “Are you from the South? Your name is so southern!” My favorite comment, though, is, “What a great name for a writer!”

I have always loved the Karma that comes with the Arabic meaning of ‘May.’ After years of fighting with ‘bitter grace,’ I was thrilled to exchange it for the healing concept of ‘flowing water.’ Little did I know that down the road I was going to become a water exercise instructor, or that I would have a hand in the creation of a spiritually-based water exercise program called Aqua Chi™.

As water flowed through my life, I gradually gave up my anger at ‘bitter grace’ and began telling the full story of my name. But for many years I refused to tell people my birth name. Now I laugh and explain that my legal name, because I still need to go to court to fully document the change, is “Mary Anne Cotton now known as May Cotton.” I learned that little tidbit from my mother’s lawyer when I became her Power of Attorney.

But of course the very best part of the story is my how my father reacted when I told him I’d changed my name to May. “I don’t like it,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s so . . . so nebulous, as in ‘maybe,’ ‘maybe not.’”