

Born in Seventh Grade
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As far as I can remember, I was born when I was 12 years old. It was early spring of 1963, and I was in Social Studies Class. Mr. Kingsbury was leaning back against his desk at the front of the room, his pudgy hands on either side of his ample frame. He was neatly dressed in a sport jacket and tie, the usual attire for male teachers at our junior high. Unlike my dad, who was of a similar appearance, Mr. Kingsbury always seemed more fatherly than formidable to me. I was in the farthest row to the left, third seat back. Our backs were to the windows in this room, unlike our other classes. Apparently Mr. Kingsbury found us to be more attentive to his lectures when we weren't distracted by what was happening outside.

He was talking about the Magna Carta that day, but I wasn't really listening. I had just awakened to myself for the first time. I was self-conscious, self-aware like I had never been before. It was like waking up from a long dreamy sleep and suddenly realizing I was me.

There was one big difficulty with all of this. That moment in seventh grade was when my life, as I knew it, began. I knew the story of my previous self as told in photographs and the anecdotes my family shared. But I had no memory of them. Prior to that moment in Mr. Kingsbury's class, my memories consisted only of my dreams.

I could clearly remember and even relive every dream, every nightmare. But I could remember nothing beyond the dreams. This strange lack of memory stayed with me into my 40s when I began to write about my family. Gradually the memories started coming back to me, and the more I wrote, the more I remembered. Once the door to my mind was opened, the thrill of remembering became its own kind of drug, dangerous and seductive.

When I talk to old friends, they are surprised by how much I remember, how clearly I can recount an incident or describe a room or neighborhood in fine detail.

The dreams from my childhood are less vivid now than they were when they were the only memories I had. One source of my nightmares was the matinees my brother and I attended on Saturdays. After watching *The Time Machine*, I had nightmares about World War Three until 1964 became a distant memory — that was the year the hero went to the future and encountered World War Three. My vivid imagination allowed me to believe the story was real. I even had nightmares after watching *A Dog Called Buddy*, because that movie began with a car accident in which the little boy's parents were killed. Even though the story had a happy ending, I couldn't stop seeing the car going around a curve where it was hit and rolled off the road.

Another nightmare that troubled me for years had me walking home from school along our familiar street, but when I got to my own house, either someone else was living there or the house itself was unrecognizable. This dream, together with the ones in which our family was fleeing the coming bomb, but always with one family member left behind, remind me how frightened and insecure I was as a child.

For years I had "building" dreams in which I was finding my way through a vast labyrinth of wide corridors, high ceilings, and enormous rooms. Sometimes these building were reminiscent of schools; other times they were more like indoor coliseums or sports arenas, with mazes of tunnels, big enough for cars, leading to underground rooms. Often in these dreams I was with someone I knew and usually there were other people around. Sometimes I was in charge of a huge crowd. There was always a task or a quest involved, often unsuccessful, but I've never regarded my building dreams as nightmares. They're just very intriguing and

adventuresome.

My parents tried hard to curtail my imagination to no avail. On one particularly boring day in sixth grade, I began drawing a map of the island community I'd been dreaming about for a couple of years. The islands were connected to each other by railed walkways formed by narrow bridges between the islands. There was a small cottage in the center of each island, and one of my imaginary friends lived in every one. There were five or six islands on my colored pencil map.

In my 30s I thought of myself as twins in the womb, except one of us had died and the other was born as me. But at that moment in Mr. Kingsbury's class, that moment when I woke up, I believed I awoke as the twin who had died. I thought her soul had come into me and my soul had gone off somewhere else. Eventually I would discover the original me was still in there too.

I came to view myself as two distinctly different personalities, the original soul who was called Mary Anne, and the newer one who went by May. I assigned each of us characteristics so I could identify who was up, who was in charge at that moment, who was telling the other one what to do. There were disagreements and arguments, bickering and shouting, both voices coming out of one mouth. Mary Anne was organized and responsible. May was flighty, a free spirit. Mary Anne spoke harshly to May in our father's voice. May remonstrated her with the voices of the world.

At some point I sketched a picture of us, two thin girls on a hillside, walking hand-in-hand toward the rising sun. The one dressed in purple points toward the right with her left hand. The one in teal carries a red flower in her right hand, picked from the field behind them to their left. The girls have black hair and dark skin, though I couldn't say why, unless there was a shortage of colored pencils. Or perhaps it was because I'd met Alice Walker, author of my then-favorite book *The Color Purple*, three weeks before. In my sketch, the sun shines down in yellow and red streaks, the flowers are simple green stems with scribbled red blossoms, the hillside is faintly shaded green. There are few other details, except for the title "Twins" and 4/22/87 in the lower right corner. Underneath it reads MAY. I was 36.

In my 40s I would hold hands in a circle with other women and enact a ritual in which I intentionally integrated Mary Anne and May. Now I understand this splitting of personalities is called dissociation, and it happens to many victims of abuse. These days I recognize the multiple facets of my personality and understand how I split myself along arbitrary lines. I know there is only one me, yet I still refer to myself as "we" in my head, and I struggle not to talk to myself aloud when I am in the company of others.

At the end of that day in seventh grade, I went home from school like always, but on this day I discovered blood on my panties. My mother was across the alley talking to the neighbor, while I was panicking, certain I was dying. Mom was disgusted with me when she finally learned what was wrong, tossing me a pamphlet to read and telling me where the sanitary napkins were stored. She seemed to think I should have remembered the movie we saw in fourth grade at Girl Scouts which explained in fine detail how a girl becomes a woman. But like everything else in my life, I had forgotten, until I read the pamphlet and relearned.

I think I woke up that day in Mr. Kingsbury's class because I had just been reborn as a woman. My innocence was gone. I was no longer a distracted child, drifting through dreams and hiding the memories of what went on at night after the lights were out and my father was roaming the dark. But now that I was truly awake at last, I could finally fight back.