

I Am Born

My maternal grandfather, a prolific inventor, often photographed me when I was a baby. From one of my many stays with my Granddaddy and Nana, I have an old black and white snapshot: a little girl with curly hair, not quite two, stands with arms outstretched, looking up and out at someone beyond the left edge of the shot. She wears a full-skirted dress with an embroidered bodice, and smiles up with widened eyes in slightly anxious anticipation. You would guess she is about to be lifted up, or hugged, or carried. You would hope so; there is such eagerness in that tense little body.

I was the firstborn of three girls, and though a small baby, only seven pounds one ounce, I retain a lingering remorse for the difficulty of my birth. Apparently I had a really hard head. According to my mother, the normal soft spots in a baby's skull which obligingly compress during delivery did not function the way they were supposed to, and she was sick for a long time after my birth. Today, you might consider post-partum depression or any number of other psychological complications: a glamorous young woman, just 20, having married her first love, a handsome army lieutenant even younger than she, quit school and gave up her acting ambitions to have a family. And then a year later she got me.

I was supposed to be a boy, named Andrew, so what a shock the hard-headed girl must have been. I was a terrible baby. I had colic. I cried all the time. I was difficult, angry, obstinate. I refused to eat. My first sentence was, "I don't want it." Though proud of how strangers always commented on her pretty little girl, my mother didn't really know what to do with me. She smoked to keep her weight down, in those days before the Surgeon General's announcement, and I was sick all the time. My mother suffered from anxiety and migraines, so she would leave me in my bedroom until I got better, telling me she wasn't a good nurse and she didn't know what to do for me. Many years later a neurologist commented on the extensive scarring on my eardrums. "You certainly had a lot of ear infections when you were little," she remarked. "That must have been painful."

Actually what I remember is being fascinated by everything around me, even delirious with fever, especially our constantly changing home environments. My earliest memory, again at not quite two, was an evening alone in my crib in a dark bedroom. To my left a flood of light from a full silver moon streamed almost to the bars of my crib; to my right a vertical rectangle of even brighter light framed a loud dance with thumps and yells and other intriguing sounds. Later I found out that we had moved to an army base house infested by cockroaches,

and I had been witnessing my parents trying to clear the kitchen of pests. Nevertheless, in my mind this was mystical.

Every day I had giant adventures. I believed magic was real. I knew if I could just figure out the right techniques I would be able to fly, move objects with my mind, and transform one thing into another.

One of my favorite games was “ants.” With black nylon fishing cord I would make populous ant communities—one knot for a baby ant with two antennae, two knots for child ants, and three knots for grown-up ants. Then I made little anthills by cutting doors and windows in paper Dixie cups and placing them upside down in strategic locations: the homes, the school, the church. I also made the ant families line up in nice orderly ant lines and saw that they visited each other regularly.

I was probably happiest listening with Granddaddy to his customized stereo in their Schenectady home, watching Shirley Temple movies with Nana in the upstairs family room, and, when not in New York, falling asleep to the sound of my mother’s voice, reading aloud. Because I knew I had been born “bad,” I always sympathized with the villains in the books she read. I’ll never forget the grief I felt during the chapter of The Hobbit when Gollum lost the ring. I felt sorry for Gollum to begin with, so lonely and miserable and antisocial. When he lost his precious ring it was almost too much for me to take. I cried for days. You could explain to me that Gollum was not really a very pleasant creature, and that he didn’t deserve the ring in the first place, but I would stubbornly persist in my mourning.

To me, what other people threw away or rejected or didn’t want acquired a special status. I developed an obsession, still with me, for fixing broken items (and broken people, broken situations, broken dreams). Until I was five, we lived in the deep South, in towns still dominated by heavy racism. Once my father, who easily tans a dark olive-brown, was told to move to the back of a bus. So I developed an imaginary ghost friend who was black. Disliking all the children’s books that showed ghosts as white, I wanted a black ghost. His name was Erk, and he used to hang upside down on the ceiling at night to make sure no spiders crawled on my bed while I was sleeping.

I was a restless sleeper, talking in my sleep, walking in my sleep, and having bizarre technicolor dreams about dragonflies in pink tights and flying aardvarks, which made my parents laugh. That’s when I first discovered the delights of telling a story.

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