



Past Lives

Crippled Helen wasn't my first pretend past life, but it was one past life that lasted an entire childhood summer. Every day at noon I'd limp up and down the long gravel hill that served as our farm's driveway to get the family mail. I imagined myself to be this other, older girl who had lost the use of her left leg and yet, in spite of this impairment, bravely made her way through the world of farm chores and life in southern Minnesota. My ten-year-old, able-legged-self walked alongside Helen pleased to be her trusted companion.

Another early pretend life took place on the same gravel driveway. But this time around I was several years older and dreaming of life farther beyond the barnyard fences. With limited experience of escape, but with an ample imagination, I came up with the idea that if I sang well enough and loud enough while going up and down the hill to get the mail every day, I just might be discovered by a talent scout driving by on County Road 19. Chicago was the farthest away I could think of, and so it was singing to Chicago that got me through the searing noonday heat of a southern Minnesota July and August. The odds of a talent scout, or anyone from Chicago, driving past on the two-lane gravel county road were, of course, nil.

But perhaps my most ambitious pretending was also my shortest past life. At age 14 I had a brief, glorious moment thinking that I could become a saint and, for that instant, pretended to be one. But as quick as I settled into the role of sainthood, I knew my chances for canonization were

finished. I can still remember the chill as the steel blade of logic severed my thinking. In that instant I knew without doubt that by simply imagining myself as saintly material, I had demonstrated an obvious lack of humility and handily disqualified myself before even getting to the starting gate.

With that, my pretend past lives ended, and several years later after leaving the convent—which was nothing like pretending to be in a convent—I found the University of Minnesota, the West Bank, the era of free love, and bell-bottoms. But rather than pretend I was a hippie, I now stuck fiercely to who I was—a woman who had a past life as a farmer’s daughter and as a convent aspirant, who after four years decided not to become a nun. At age 20 I took every class in the Humanities Department I could manage, gave up the idea of becoming an art major, thought seriously about how to feed myself in the years to come, and set about the business of learning about the world in an ever widening reach.

In northeast Minneapolis, I started a school where I unexpectedly learned countless lessons about single parenting, poverty, and class. One powerful lesson came in seeing that, while I was supporting myself and a school for 22 preschoolers with a grant of \$250 per month, I was the only one among the people involved in the school who had the ability or resources to leave the neighborhood. Most of the women I got involved in the P.S. 822 program had never been downtown. Few of them even thought of knocking on the door of a stranger down the hallway. All of them were single parents living on welfare checks. No one I got to know while in northeast Minneapolis was the least bit interested in pretending to be a saint.

During my past life as a Legal Aid paralegal, I traveled further into the world of otherness. Now I was entering the world of state institutions for the developmentally disabled and representing parents of children with autism, mental retardation, epilepsy, and learning disabilities. These parents were struggling for educational access, housing, medical care, and every other matter concerning their children’s quality of life. Here I didn’t have to pretend I was riding in on a white horse. I simply arrived time and time

again—just in time—to prevent eviction, or termination of rights, or to get someone out of detox, someone who was not drunk, someone who needed transport home after his or her seizure had subsided.

So I've had a plethora of past lives. I've also been a parent to two sons and a partner for 28 years. I've been a daughter to a German farmer father and an Irish farmer mother. I've been a self-employed artist who got more newspaper coverage than pay and a college teacher in English and humanities for 18 years. I've been a neighbor, a friend, a mentor, and an apron nutcase who has more than 500 aprons still boxed and piled high in my closet.

I've had a past life as a traveler. I dragged my hands through the Okavango Delta until I remembered the mucky waters are headquarters for some of Botswana's most dangerous snakes and crocodiles. I've spent nights on India's trains straining to see something of the sky through the yellowed train windows. Out in the Kalahari I marveled at the Southern Cross and sat quietly on the *South Pacific* movie location on the coastline of Western Samoa. In the end, I didn't need to pretend I could be anywhere. I simply packed my bags and went farther and farther away from the family farm in southern Minnesota.

All my past lives are here inside me still, and every past life I recall with great fondness. Crippled Helen taught me to be brave and strong. My saintly ambitions showed me early on the folly of being too full of oneself. Teaching, creating, being in relationships, even collecting aprons were means given me to reach still farther, not only out into the world beyond, but deep into the world within.

And now I have another life to add to my list of past lives—life on Planet Cancer. Like all past lives, this life has lessons to teach and stories to tell. And maybe when all is said and done, all past lives roll together into one grand assurance to others that, pretend or not, life is what we are doing while peeling an orange, climbing a mountain, or sitting still in the afternoon sun watching ice flow by on the Mississippi River. Today we can remember yesterday, and tomorrow we'll know that today is simply one more part of our past lives.