



Childhood's "Old Memories"

You came in with a keen sense of your surroundings. With “eyes wide open,” you have a broadened awareness of what is around you and give the adults who care for you the uneasy feeling of being watched. The adults get the sense from the first time they see you that this defenseless little being in their care is hiding the secrets of the Universe (because you are). You are not disconnected from your soul’s wealth of knowledge and physical skills accumulated throughout the centuries. You have access to and use past-life knowledge in your everyday interactions, though you may not have a context in which to understand what these old memories are. You are difficult children to raise and test to the core those who try. Due to your differences and difficulties in trying to fit in, you tend to be shunned by the larger group. Besides, children of your type seem so much happier when left alone to ponder life’s great mysteries. This is part of your unique collective journey. Adult suspicions are soon confirmed as you begin to show uncanny traits and talents that other children your age don’t display. There is, however, usually someone—a parent, grandparent, aunt / uncle, or teacher—in the sphere of these special children who recognizes these differences as gifts, fosters their development with fierce conviction, and acts as the child’s protector throughout the early years.

The first time I remember being seen as different was during art period in kindergarten. I was painting at an easel, wearing one of my father’s old dress shirts as a smock, its length covering my rubber-toed

Keds. An unfamiliar lady came into the classroom and, with our teacher, looked at all the children's paintings under way. When they got to me, the lady whispered to my teacher and started asking me questions, interrupting my process of remembering what it looked and felt like to be in the scene I was painting. It was a detailed underwater scene of brightly colored fish swimming through a kelp bed with the sun's rays filtering through the multi-shaded water, viewed from the ocean floor looking up at the hull of an old wooden sailing ship. I felt simultaneously in my brain and chest all the sensations of color, shading, shadows, movement, pressure, and wetness of the scene.

The lady wanted to know where I had seen what I was painting. Knowing that I had never physically been to the bottom of the ocean with the ability to look up toward the surface in my six short years, I remember realizing in that moment that I saw such pictures in vivid detail all the time and they came from somewhere else besides my experience in this life. I tried to explain this and watched her face actually crinkle up in her attempt to understand. Finally, I asked, "Doesn't everybody see things like that?" She looked uncomfortable, and I felt uncomfortable then, too. I decided I better keep my perceptions to myself from then on.

Increasingly after that, I felt like a different species from everyone else. I began to feel very alone and subsided into virtual mutism. I would often escape from my uncomfortable life into a familiar reality of vivid images and full sensations. The scenes I lived there included riding wildly into battle, wearing a feather headdress and slathered with war paint; sensing the terror and camaraderie of my brethren hunkered down in a muddy bunker with gunfire and shells exploding all around us; feeling a deep sense of connection as I peered out at the Himalayas from a monastery window; and living as a gutsy American frontier woman, a young pharaoh riding a camel past the great pyramids at Giza, a swaggering pirate, a dignified knight in full armor, a debonair British doctor in Africa, and a castaway Polynesian islander swimming with dolphins and whales. Such remembrances were so much a part of my inner world that I never questioned their origin and had difficulty distinguishing them from experiences I was having in what I later came to know as "this lifetime." I assumed that everybody had similar internal experiences. Later, I termed them my "old memories."

I went home from kindergarten that day with a note for my parents stuffed into my lunch pail. It was from the teacher, asking my parents' permission for the lady to borrow my painting when it was finished. Years later I learned she was a child development expert who had featured the painting in a book she was writing. My kindergarten teacher had alerted her that my visual and creative abilities were seven to ten years ahead of my age group. As a result of all the attention, my art-teacher mother had visions of her daughter becoming the next Rembrandt or Picasso.

At recess I would become absorbed in the most intricate particulars of the natural world. I recall sitting in the dirt on the kindergarten playground and marveling at the wavelike motion of a centipedes' legs as it walked. I would gaze at the colors and patterns of a butterfly's wings and want to draw them to capture their beauty on paper. I would ask friends of my parents questions like "Whatever possessed those clouds to do that?" or "What is the ocean trying to remind us of by sending us its waves over and over again?" I remember them looking at me with uncomfortable expressions.

While our teacher read to us in class, I would imagine the scenes from the book in three dimensions. I thought not in words but in pictures that often included graphs and force diagrams, elements I later learned were higher order physics diagrams. I loved to be read to and looked forward to one day reading on my own.

My interactions with people were strange and confusing to me. I didn't feel like one of them; I felt like a foreigner in a body that only looked human. At first, the differences were less obvious, since my father seemed to understand me and our family was unconventional, though not in the same way I was.

My father, William Talty, grew up the bastard son of an Irish immigrant who worked for the mafia in Omaha, Nebraska, during Prohibition. The Irishman abandoned his young family when my father was six months old. My father's mother, a spunky Sicilian named Katie Marcuzzo, had, as a teenager, helped her widowed mother provide for their family of nine by producing bootleg whiskey and running it in the middle of the night in a beat-up, rusted-out truck to the speakeasies in Omaha and Council Bluffs, Iowa, across the Missouri River.

Great-grandmother Marcuzzo's operation was well known to the authorities, and she was often arrested. During her arraignments, this four-foot-ten-inch woman would stand before the bench, barely able to see over it, and explain to the judge in broken English, "What is a single woman raising nine children to do, your honor?" He always took pity and sentenced her to a few months of "house arrest." Since she was famous for her Sicilian cooking, this meant showing up at the judge's house at 10 a.m. to prepare his lunch and dinner. She was allowed to return to her own house by 3 p.m. when her children got home from school.

Grandmother Katie, a free spirit, took herself on a joy ride to California in the family truck one spring and ended up staying. Later, after her Irish husband disappeared, she was known to run off with men, leaving my father and his two siblings in the care of her mother. Or so my uncles said when they came from Nebraska for her funeral. I had only known the woman who worked three waitress jobs to make ends meet or was busy in her kitchen, apron on, cooking us family dinners on Sundays.

Her wild streak had ended at forty-three when she was diagnosed with malignant breast cancer and faced the only lifesaving procedure known at the time, a radical mastectomy. My father was by then a second-year student at Bellarmine College Preparatory, a private high school for boys. He was paying his own tuition by working at the local supermarket. Somehow this fifteen-year-old kid convinced the doctors that he would take responsibility for the bills. He took on more hours at the market. He challenged classmates to pool matches before school to make his lunch money. If he lost, he did not eat. On the street corner in the early mornings, he sold doughnuts, which my grandmother had made at 4 a.m. The medical bills were paid off in three years.

At Bellarmine, he was studying side by side with boys from influential families who lived in dignified University Avenue estates. As he made friends, he would be invited to their homes. An amicable and polite kid from the other side of town, several of his friends' fathers took him under their wing like one of their own sons. He developed relationships with these families that lasted his lifetime.

The upbringing of my mother, Carol Caputo, contrasted sharply with my father's. Her mother, the child of first-generation immigrants

from Naples, Italy, was a college-educated real estate broker and accountant. Her family eventually moved from New York to California, where my grandmother met my grandfather, Nicholas Caputo, an Italian immigrant who had earned his passage to America by fulfilling a commission to sculpt the bust of a prominent New Yorker while en route to Ellis Island. In California, he made a living as a machinist while gradually purchasing land and planting orchards in California's fertile Santa Clara Valley. Eventually, he farmed hundreds of acres of fruit and nut trees while he and my grandmother raised three children. Later, as the valley's economy shifted from orchards to silicon, he moved from farming into property development and management, and the family's wealth increased exponentially. For Mom, life was always a party, and she was always the star squeezing as much fun out of it as possible. She did, however, study art history and earn a teaching credential. Though she dated many suitors, she ended her wild ways the day she met my father. There was one problem. He was Sicilian, or at least half, and in the late-1950s no right-minded upscale Italian father would let his daughter marry a Sig (Italian slang for a Sicilian), his Irish surname notwithstanding.

My father was self-conscious about his heritage and also the fact that he had no money, so he was very nervous about asking my mother's father for permission to marry her. He did not even own a car; my mother had to pick him up in her two-door sports coupe to bring him to the house. When my grandfather opened the door, my father held out his hands and said, "Sir, I am in love with your daughter, and I ask for her hand in marriage. I have nothing to offer except my hands and my heart. I promise to work hard to make you proud of both of us." Sicilian or not, he had spoken words that resonated with my grandfather. And he made good on his promise.

Three years later, on March 16, 1962, I was born. The pregnancy was uneventful, although Mom admits to fashionable smoking and enjoying a social cocktail on the weekends. The delivery was another matter. Mom's belly churned, thumped, and quaked. I was actively changing positions, the doctor said, flipping around as if to avoid the inevitable squeeze through the birth canal. Eventually, out I came, looking very different from her firstborn, who had presented as a light-skinned, tow-headed Gerber baby. I had bright red skin and not only black hair on my

head, but black fur extending from my eyebrows up my forehead, down the back of my neck, torso, and legs. Mom thought she had given birth to an ape.

In those days, breast-feeding was not fashionable, and I proved to be highly allergic to baby formulas, projectile vomiting across the room. My mother would pick me up and try to comfort me. I would shake wildly and throw up all over her. Anticipating how difficult our homecoming would be with a two-and-a-half-year-old at home as well, my father hired a nurse for the first week. I am convinced she was a spirit guardian placed in my path to help ease the transition back into this world. The moment she would pick me up, I would stop crying. She suggested feeding me goat's milk instead of formula, and the vomiting stopped. At the end of the seventh day, however, when the door shut behind her, all hell broke loose again. For the first year of my life, I was a colicky, unpleasant baby who screamed and squirmed when anyone picked me up and cradled me in their arms. Family friends and relatives would look in on me in my bassinet and, seeing my eyes fixed on theirs, make comments like, "That stare! What is she looking at?"

My earliest memory is from eighteen months of age. I remember waking up from a nap one afternoon to the sound of movement and rustling in my room. I peeked out through the bars of my crib to see my father setting up a real bed for me. A surge of excitement ran through my body as I realized I was finally going to be released from this "cage." Even then, I remembered the ancient viscerally sickening feeling of being restrained. Because I was such a challenging child, my mother sought the advice of a psychiatrist, who recommended that she return to teaching to get out of the house for a while. By the time I turned two, she was leaving me home weekdays with a baby-sitter. I vividly remember standing in my jammies and bare feet on the front porch in the cold morning air as her car pulled out of the driveway, screaming through the tears running down my face, "Don't leave me, Mommy, don't leave!" She would always leave anyway. This and similar experiences endemic to a busy two-income family throughout my early years seeded me with a fierce sense of self-reliance, another trait that would dictate many later choices. I learned that ultimately it was up to me to take care of me. Because I saw my mother's leaving as abandonment rather than helping

with the young family's finances, I often felt as if she didn't care and she was often too busy to help if I had a question. That was not the case with my father, however.

From the beginning, he and I had a way of understanding each other's thoughts and intentions without having to speak them, as if we knew each other beyond the confines of this current experience of playing the roles of father and daughter. He was my greatest teacher. I relentlessly asked him why, about everything. Why are leaves shaped like they are? Why do dogs have fur? Why do we always need to breathe? Why are we warm? Where does the rain come from? How is snow made? How do cuts heal? Why do animals eat each other? Why, why, why, why. It must have driven him mad, but he patiently tried his best to satisfy my burning curiosity about the world and how I fit into it.