

# Self-Discovery

Marilyn M. Nelson

When I was seven, I realized that I had two selves: one was the self that played and got new shoes and that people talked to. The other was inside of it, and this self mostly thought about things. It was the second self, the inner one, that fascinated me most. Where could it have come from? Had I always possessed it? I didn't remember it developing; it was just there, suddenly, like one of the mysterious bruises that were always appearing on my knees and shins. This inner self had come to my attention, it seemed, from two realizations.

The first had to do with words. I read, in kindergarten, every Hardy Boys book I could get my hands on. Nancy Drew I scorned—I thought, stubbornly, and with no sense of justice for my own sex, that she was too much of a girl to be a good detective. I read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I also read, but where my brothers wouldn't see me, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Secret Garden*, *A Little Princess*, and *The Boxcar Children*. My kindergarten teacher took pity on me and gave me a school library card, with strict instructions not to tell the other children. In class, I went through the motions of learning the alphabet letters: Mr. “F” has funny feet; Mr. “M” has a munchy mouth. To my annoyance, the little songs and rhymes we learned to help us with the alphabet kept up a constant hum in my subconscious. I had learned to expect this with words, though. No matter how I tried, I couldn't banish them—the sounds, the rhythms, the shapes of them—from my mind.

These are the facts of it: words slithered through my head always, and sometimes they stuck there like burrs, and sometimes they battered themselves against my consciousness like angry dogs against a fence. Some came in phrases, familiar as puzzle pieces fitting into my thoughts. They were from books, from records, from songs: *Hey, Little John! I'm all right; I've been breathing through this reed . . . The duck, played by the oboe in the very low register . . . And like a thunderbolt, he falls*. Some I did not understand, but they seemed familiar all the same. They played in my head like music—and sometimes, inexplicably, they were music. I woke up with symphonies crashing in my head, and somehow they were words and notes and rhythm all wound into one. *Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? . . . In my place, I leave Mr. Baggins . . . Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian . . . My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him*. They wove trails and patterns in my thoughts. Looking at words,

I had to make them fit the patterns in my head, and I involuntarily arranged and rearranged words, sometimes making them meaningless, mentally adding letters, lengthening pieces of *y*'s and *m*'s, giving numeric value to symbols and making them add up until they fit into their proper puzzle-piece places in my mind. I couldn't define what made a word or a phrase fit, but I knew when one did. Later I learned about physical phenomena that were similar: membranes vibrating at a specific frequency, enzymes linking with specific body chemicals, sound waves striking at the correct angle to make echoes. This is how words were for me. They struck at my head, but only some resonated. *Goblin. Moon. Skink. Papaya. Flapjack.* They bounced back and forth, echoing.

The second realization came to my consciousness during a bike ride. I learned late to ride a bike, and so when I learned, I was dizzy with the joy of doing what I had so long wished to do. On a bike, I could push the limits of my neighborhood further. The most distant point in my world was a winding dirt road called Old Willow Lane. It nestled right up beside the mountain, flanked by a high hill on one side and an irrigation canal on the other. It was a little-used road, partly because of the potholes in it. There was always water in these potholes, and my newly acquired bicycle skills were tested every time I tried to avoid them. If you walked off the road, you'd be immediately on the hill, and you could climb up to the closest ridge and see the whole city beneath you.

There was danger on Old Willow, not just the puddles and the seclusion and the wildness of it, but snakes sometimes and cougars, too, I supposed, though I'd never actually run into one. Worst of all, there were boys who rode their dirt bikes beneath the apricot trees down by the canal—big boys, who'd throw lighted matches at you if you got in their way. It had happened to my friend Rachael on her way home from school once, in broad daylight. They called themselves the Oak Hills Vandals, and the neighborhood rippled and hummed over their exploits. Once I'd seen some of their vandalism: a bright red "OHV" spray painted on the fence by the school playground. I couldn't understand why they'd painted their symbol so flagrantly on the fence; everyone knew who they were, and the PTA was hopping mad. If I'd done it, I thought, I would have painted some letters that no one knew, a word not standing for anything, a made-up word even, and nobody would ever find out who did it. I said so to my mother, and she said that the boys wanted people to know who they were. It didn't make sense. If I were a vandal, I'd be better at it, I thought.

I suddenly realized, riding my bike past the apricot-tree lair of the Oak Hills Vandals, that I thought about things like this a lot. And this, this unexpected criminality in myself, both terrified and amazed me. At school, inside the skin of my obedient outer self, I thought secretly and rationally



about the things I could get away with because of my very goodness. My first-grade teacher, Miss White, knew she could trust me to go to the office and pick up copies for her or to take a note to another teacher. I learned from these errands. For example, I knew from watching frustrated teachers that the door to the faculty lounge would unlock if you wiggled the door-knob. I read notices on the faculty bulletin board: there will be a fire drill tomorrow; this afternoon the superintendent is dropping in. I knew from listening to loud-voiced secretaries what the code for the copy machine was. I knew which closet contained the secret trapdoor to the cellar. And as I walked dutifully down the shiny halls to do my teacher's errands, I made detailed plans about the things I could do with these bits of knowledge. Nearly all the teachers knew me, and I was always good; they wouldn't question anything I did. There were, I thought in my secret thoughts, no crimes I could not commit at school. The clarity with which I could see how I could commit them frightened me.

I plotted. At the airport, the buckle on my patent-leather shoes set off the metal detector, and the guard, assuming it was a mistake, waved me on with a bored hand. I was indignant that I wasn't even considered a threat. That night, I lay in bed devising a secret spy bomb that I could carry in my shoe and smuggle past metal detectors in foreign countries. When I was alone, I stood by the mirror and practiced looking innocent.

I amused myself by thinking up alibis for misdeeds I had never done. I thought of ways I could get away with things: Forgery? I'm only seven, officer. We don't learn cursive till next year.

I thought these things, and I did not know why I thought them, because I actually had no urge to be bad. But I did not seem to be able to stop seeing the ways I could be bad. I didn't understand it, and I wondered if it were something to feel guilty about and repent of. I hoped not, and then I did feel guilty for trying to get out of repenting.

I rode my bike past the Old Willow canal, and chills of terror crept up my arms, not just because of the boys, but because of my own thoughts. What was to stop me, I thought, from turning into a vandal myself? I seemed to be headed there already, and the thought horrified me. I could hardly see to steer around the puddles in the dirt road. Worried, I pushed my bike off the road and a little way onto the hillside. There were flowers here in spring, and, just as pretty, weeds in fall. Today I picked them in small enough bundles that I could carry them in one hand curled around my bike's handlebar, because I did not ride one-handed. Sometimes my brothers would coast gloriously along with no hands at all, but I would do no such thing. This bike riding was a perilous enough thing without devising additional dangers for it. And, curiously, the emergence of this thought brought me a sudden thrill of hope where reason had not: would a vandal,



a criminal, be scared to ride one-handed? Surely not. I was saved. Riding home, I felt like singing, happy with the intense happiness of relief. *Hey, Little John! I'm all right.*

The idea, though, had been planted. These two realizations—my secret badness and the writhing, squirming chorus of words and sounds inside my head—led me suddenly and dazzlingly to this splendid discovery of my own inner life. I did not know if everyone had this shouting, this motion of words humming inside of them, just as I did not know if everyone else thought about committing crimes. But these things were inside of me, and they were the most real things I knew. They were also uniquely my own and hidden from everyone else unless I chose to share them. It was, I realized, as if I had a cocoon of skin, and inside it I was suddenly, joyously free. I delighted in knowing that, no matter what the situation, I could have any thoughts I wanted, and no one could stop me.

This capability—and it seemed to me an extraordinary one, even if everyone possessed it—was to carry me through many a horrible situation, and it never failed to gladden me when I thought of it.

In my third-grade year, a frazzled substitute teacher assigned us to read a story in our reading book. She had been fed up with us all day; she had arrived expecting a troublesome class—we were third graders, after all—and we had done our best to live up to her expectations. Even Rachael and I, who normally felt sorry for substitutes, had stayed out late at recess to protest this teacher's clear distaste for children. We started reading time. The substitute had given up any pretense of patience and announced that she would be reading the story along with us. If anyone finished before she did, she told us, she would know they hadn't really done the reading. The class, tired from the morning's exertions, called a temporary truce and fell silent. We read.

I had discovered several years earlier that I seemed to read faster than most people. Reading over my parent's shoulders, I would finish the page and sit, bored, for several long minutes waiting for them to turn it. My brothers would exclaim, exasperated, that I had just borrowed two Hardy Boys books that morning, and I couldn't possibly be finished already and need another. But the fact was, oddly enough, that I could and did read several hundred pages in a morning. I didn't understand why anyone would take more than a day to read a book; it was much better to just finish it all in one sitting so you didn't break up the action. But I also knew instinctively that this wasn't the sort of thing one talked about, and so when I read a book with someone else, I finished the page and then waited, pretending to be ready to turn the page only when they were. Sometimes I'd even linger a bit longer on the page after the other person had finished so they wouldn't find me out. When assigned at school to read the instructions

on standardized tests and then look up, I read them three times and looked up when the person next to me did.

I read the story the substitute had assigned us, and then I quietly turned back and read it again. I played my word game idly with the title, arranging the letters until they fit the right pattern in my head. After what seemed a suitable time, I looked up.

Obviously displeased that the class was, contrary to her assumptions, being good, the substitute caught my head motion. "Are you finished?" she asked. I nodded, wishing she wouldn't talk so loud. Yes, I was finished. No need to announce it to the whole class. "There's no way you could be," she said triumphantly. I stared at her. "I'm not even to the third page," she said. "Start over, and really read it this time." I was stunned by the outrage of it. How could she? But again, remembering my inner freedom brought sudden relief. I lowered my eyes to the book, rejoicing: I did not have to read this again! I could sit here, looking at the page, and I could think what I wished! I could listen to the steady pattering of words inside my head; I could take a mental bike ride; I could think about cats or frogs. I was giddily, breathlessly happy with this realization, and I sat, nearly overwhelmed with the wonder of it, until the teacher made her deliberate way to the end of the story and I could again take my eyes from my book.

From then on, I was free even under the most tyrannical of circumstances. I delighted in the knowledge that some part of me, at least, was entirely my own. I could now and forever listen to the exultation of words in my head: *Goblin! Goblin! Goblin! . . . His going forth is as prepared as the morning . . . Wild men, who caught and sang the sun in flight . . .* It was like a psalm. I listened, fascinated, thankful.

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