

# The Beginning of a New Life

By **Pia de Jong** - January 23, 2019



I am seven years old. I have left my school early. The teacher has sent me to the house of my best friend, Tilly. She lives a short distance outside the village, in a farm between the meadows. Today she stayed

home because she did not feel well. I've walked this road often, but never without Tilly. It's a little after 12 noon, hot and quiet. A few birds are perched on the barbed wire fences. There are deep cracks in the dirt road, and I do my best not to trip over loose stones. My knee socks have sagged, as have the hems of my green plaid skirt. The school is far behind me, a dot on the horizon. In front of me I see the low roof of Tilly's farmhouse. I stop, hearing an airplane that traces a wispy line high in the sky. I follow it with my finger.

And then it happens. Out of nowhere I realize, in full force, that I am "Me." Not my parents. Not Tilly. Just me, myself, and I. I exist. Here and now. I awake to my own life, in which I play the leading role. It is an overwhelming experience. I have crossed a threshold. I left one world and, with the shock of recognition, have discovered my own. How long I stood there on that sandy road under the burning sun with my new insight, I do not know. Not even how the rest of the afternoon went. I know I did not tell anyone. I never forgot, but I could not explain it either. But from that moment on, everything was different.

A while ago I read the book "I Am I: Sudden Flashes of Self-Awareness in Childhood" by developmental psychologist Dolph Kohnstamm, which reports on such experiences. I found out that I am not the only one with whom the sense of self suddenly broke through. People describe it as a flash or a shock. A lifting of the fog. Often they are somewhere alone. Many remember the

details sharply. It is an unforgettable experience.

For me the moment marked the end of a life in which things simply happened to me. This was the beginning of a new life in which I myself was involved and had a voice and a mind and free will of my own.

I just have to close my eyes to be back on that dirt road. I feel the pebbles under my sandals. The bright sun prickling my skin. I can stop the time and stretch the moment, as if it were made of elastic, responsive to me. I can choose to look at a thin line in the sky and try to follow it with my finger. Behind me is my old life. The school, the classroom with the teacher reading so nicely, my desk with the colored pencils and the ruler.

A few hundred meters to go, and at the end Tilly will be there waiting for me. She will smell like homemade stew and she has a dog.

But for a moment I hover between past and present, keeping a delicate balance between the world that is past and the world that is to come. In the meantime I am here.

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