

## **MICHIGAN, *the place***

by

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Physically, I was born in Chicago - but my soul came to be in Michigan. It came alive in the untamed grass fields of the dunes and among the rising voices of the maple trees in the winds of a storm. I found it printed on the beach by the hooves of *Honey Boy*, our one-eyed piebald wonder horse from Zeeland. It was in the blue stains on my hands after blueberry picking from the bushes planted in the cold winds of early spring with my Uncle Edward and Aunt Mirva. I heard it in the early morning in the sweet sounds of the wings of the hummingbird as it sipped among the trumpets of the vine growing by the screen of our sleeping porch. Holland, Michigan.

Imprints of joy on a young mind already convinced of its love of *the place* where we spent three months of each of our years. In the place we made fudge and played monopoly on cool, rainy September days. We built treehouses and I, for one, honed my sense of construction on them. One of them even had two rooms and creaked when the wind blew hard, it being in the tall trees at the top of the blood by the lake. It made me know that I was part of the tree that held it. A tiny but necessary mercantile sense was born in our expeditions with our wagon as we hauled it from house to house, trying to sell the big, sweet, green apples or the gnarled, striped ones from the old Duchess tree for 2 or 3 cents a pound. Those were the days!

At *the place*, we played without counting time in the old 1903 Marmon dumbstruck, stored in the barn by my grandfather, so many years ago. It was a long time before I understood that the detached car body, with its fenders sitting on supports on the other side of the barn, actually fitted into the dumbstruck part, which then turned it into a family vehicle for Sundays and family outings. Its horn actually did sound *ooga ooga*, and its tires were neatly stacked in the basement of the house. But it didn't need that reality. To us, it was better than any merry-go-round. it traveled our minds - and that was what we were seeking.

My grandfather told us of the sandy roads and of Gordon Walker, the horse they kept and who took them from the boat from Chicago to *the place*, and then to town during the long summers, well before the time of the Marmon. We used some of those remaining sandy roads to go to and from Ventura School, about a mile and a half from home. Our school in Chicago did not begin until October, so we went in September with the greatest delight to this wonderful one room schoolhouse, with its bell to make us hurry in the mornings. We brought lunch in lunchpails and we played mightily with all the others from the first to the eighth grade at lunch time, occasionally getting into water fights via the old hand pump. Then, as we walked home - everybody walked home, then - we face what we thought of as a scary adventure: on the road home, we had to pass by a billy goat who had been known to actually knock people down, or so we believed. The pasture where he and his lady friends held sway was not fenced. Even though Mr Billy was chained, we did not know how long that chain actually was. As all children, we did

love to scare ourselves, so we took good advantage of the opportunity he gave us, he with his horns curved powerfully around his head. We thrilled with the daily passing by, and with our success in defying the dangerous beast.

Then there were the long, joyous years of our horses: Sandy, Honey Boy and Sally Carter, with visitors here and there. They lived in the old barn in the summer and wintered in the good farm of Mr Nabber, near Zeeland, for fees earned energetically by babysitting and assorted odd jobs. Our horses brought us the deepest joys, racing down the beach and better yet, swimming with us on their backs in Lake Michigan. But incomparable was the softness of lying in the grass under the moonlight, among Honey Boy's legs, held by a sense of the universe imparted by the stars above. Our equine friends allowed us to participate in all the local horse shows and in the Holland Junior Horse Club which met on the idyllic grounds of the Nyland farm, where reigned or us with her big brown eyes Golden Lady, the glorious palomino.

Michigan is the place where my mother's careful choice of bushels of peaches, our gathering of blackberries despite their thorns and, earlier in the summer, of the sweet wild strawberries, provided a rich harvest to supply our winters' need for those lush days as well as the comfort of those delicious fruits.

In the cool of spring, we could come to the Holland Tulip Festival wearing the costumes (traditional white lace caps, striped flannel skirts and the black aprons with embroidery) and wooden shoes that my father had brought back from a trip to the Netherlands in 1938. We thrilled to the Klamparn dancers as they moved in groups down 8th street, stopping to dance the joyful dances prepared so carefully for that day. I smiled as I watched one young girl carry her shoes between dances. I could well imagine how hard it was to master wearing them naturally and comfortably. On our shopping trips to town, we always looked in the window to see if the old man was at his bench making yet another pair of the traditional clogs.

My schooling in Chicago was one long wait to return to my true life on the shores of Lake Michigan. There, the sense of beauty became a primary motor and the belief that I would be able to do anything I set out to do became a real part of me. The vehicle for that soul had been formed by the wind, the waves, the sandy soil and the hoof beats. On this foundations have friendships been built and knowledge of the way of life of eastern Michigan has accumulated until now, and it has formed a home inside me, the only home I have. Even though I am wandered from Paris, my heart returns to Michigan to be nourished, to survive, to persevere.