

MY FATHER'S MAP

My father's 1918 drawing of our farm came home from the framer today. It squeezes my heart, this map. I see it through a blur, a net of old memories caught in lines and spaces drawn to scale of the house and barns, woods and fields where I grew up. To our family, it was a very special farm. In 1836 my great-grandfather, Bradley Martin, rode horseback into Michigan Territory as surveyor for an Ohio land company. He found the view from our hilltop so beautiful he built his house there in the Romantic Style with square oak beams, the front facing a sweep of woods and rolling hills. It was named "The Willows" after a row of saplings he brought from the family home in New York State and planted along the road.

It was different in other ways from the homes of our neighbors. In June, Italian roses bloomed on a slope near the house. French doors led to a balcony off the guest room and the kitchen door was once the front door of the first bank of Detroit. During my childhood we still used the original latch and large iron key. After Michigan became a state, the house was a stopping place for dignitaries traveling between Detroit and the capitol in Lansing.

Near the house is a big space on the map, a hilly bean field I slid down on my father's skis. Its boundary was the road curving down to the mailbox where I walked mornings, trailed by two cats and a crow flying above us through the trees. One spring day the crow had fallen out of its nest and when my father tried to put him back, the mother crow was gone and he fell out again. So we named him Jimmy and fed him fat white grubs inserted in my mother's curling iron and poked halfway down his throat.

Thriving on his grub diet, the crow, in due course, grew up and, to their utter consternation, became friendly with our two cats. He liked the black one better than the tiger, perhaps perceiving her as a distant relative, and often strutted perkily along beside her, hopping faster and faster to keep up, and crowing into her ear as loudly as he could. Finally, exasperated beyond endurance, she would bowl him over with a fast left and right paw. Fluttering his wings frantically to regain balance and squeaking in a crow whisper, Jimmy teetered along until, full of his story, the squeaks turned into squawks and the whole process began again.

On the map my finger follows the lane behind the barns and hired man's house to a crooked line, a creek full of zigzagging water bugs and dragon flies darting above its shallow trickle. Muddy banks were dented by hoof prints of cows and horses who stopped there to drink, and sometimes I found a turtle asleep on a rock near its edge.

The creek was the scene of one of my grandmother's favorite stories about her older brother, Ned. One day he held her hand and said, "Come on, Eva, let's jump over the creek." She jumped and he didn't. Great Grandmother Martha was not pleased to see Eva trudging back to the house with her clothes muddy and various denizens of the creek still clinging to her long hair.

Between the house and barn was the garden. Every other day of the season we picked strawberries — sweet-ripe, warmed by the sun. Those days, lunch was a large bowl of hot buttered shortcake swimming in sugary crushed berries, the thought of which sustained us through long, sweaty, back-breaking mornings. On alternate days I awoke gloating over the prospect of nothing worse to do than chase baby pigs out of the garden — so much squealing and kicking up of heels as they tore helter skelter in all directions.

The toolshed across from the garden had a dusty upstairs where my friends and I played house. Our entertainments were simple. We made “jam” out of orange lilies and wild asparagus plumes that grew in a deep ravine in the yard and pretended large brown puff balls were loaves of bread. Sometimes we rolled downhill in a blanket, leaving us black and blue and dizzily happy.

A classmate who lived along the main road often brought me rabbits which his mother raised. My mother always asked Elmer if he was sure they were boy rabbits and he always assured her they were. A few days later we invariably had a lot of baby bunnies. I remember the last one was adorable, white with a black moustache. We called her Charlie Chaplin until the inevitable happened. From then on my mother refused all rabbit offerings, saying we already had quite enough animals on the farm.

Our house, a faded red shape on my father's map, was spacious, unpainted, with a large open front porch, weathered panels of natural wood, graceful, belonging to the land around it and filled with memories long before I lived there.

At the top of the stairs by the banister was my favorite reading place next to a window commanding a view of the side yard and the branches of a tree. In the spring I could look down into a blue jay's nest. My presence there wasn't immediately obvious to my mother who thought I was ruining my eyes with too much reading. In the middle of a fascinating Henty book she thought up chores like ironing handkerchiefs or dusting our dining room table which was Eastlake Style and adorned with an incredible number of hard-to-reach planes and surfaces.

The map was in the living room. I see it still under glass on my father's desk, above it on the wall a photograph of Glacier Park from his years in the Forest Service. In another corner of the room was the chair where he sat patiently, encouraging my efforts while I drew his portrait. I

hear my mother's contralto singing *Felice* at the piano and see the horsehair sofa with carved wooden grapes where I listened in the lamplight after supper.

In the evenings the crow loved to fly among the maples and tall evergreens in the front yard, then light on my father's shoulder, sidling down his arm, head cocked on one side, making sleepy nighttime conversation. My father was a good listener and I think they understood each other quite well as darkness filled the porch.

During spring housecleaning while mother and grandmother were too busy washing windows to wonder where I was, I liked to sit on the porch steps, watching curtains billowing on the clothesline and the sky trails of birds swooping through space — farther than our land, farther than even the crow wanted to follow. I was like a cat stretching itself luxuriously into a state of otherness, letting my senses take over — warm sun, the breeze fresh from patches of leftover snow in the fields, and fragrant with the sweetness of violets and trillium in our woods.

Gazing through the trees into the distance and somehow mesmerized by sun and shadow, I dreamed of faraway places too exotic for my country mind to imagine. Since then I've traveled to those faraway places — Petra, Xian, Bou Saada — but the place crystal-clear in my memory where I long to return, is on my father's map. And years, not miles, separate us.