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Horicon

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Horicon is a small town in southcentral Wisconsin known for the Horicon Marsh. The largest freshwater cattail expanse in the United States, the marsh is a wetland haven for birds and wildlife as well as a place for humans. The Rock River flows through the marsh and the town.

How strange to return after more than twenty years. So much of my life happened elsewhere, yet Horicon remains a touchstone. I would not say I grew up here. That happened later, in other places. I would say that here I was a child. I lived as a child could and would live. I see that girl navigating her life's storm, gifted with beauty all around her, overwhelmed always by the light and images that spilled over her like raindrops. Wind ruffled her hair as she stared into distances she couldn't comprehend. Time became water, and the flood carried her away.

And now . . .

Everything on Hubbard Street seems small, almost diminutive, especially my house on its deep, narrow lot squeezed between two larger homes. Although I lived here fifty years ago, it looks pretty much the same. The house and yard did not seem small back then. They offered a whole world. The yard backed up to the Rock River, my river. Three stone terraces dropped one by one down the steep hillside toward the huge willow tree I liked to climb and the boathouse where we kept our canoe. Now, all that is obscured by the house. I don't know the people who live here and can't conjure myself walking up to the door to ask for passage through the place that was once mine and no longer belongs to me.

But at one time it did belong to me, and it belonged to me completely and in the purist sense. I might recall the lilies of the valley on the north side of the house. These gave off such an exquisite fragrance that I loved to sprawl near them on the grass. I suppose a previous owner planted them there before our tenure. But why? The flowers were not in an obvious place for people to appreciate them, not along a walkway or in a flower bed. They were just there, and I knew they were there. It was like so many other things in that place. I knew all, or at least most, of its secrets.

Back then, I lived in a world of pure sensation and a kind of wholistic knowledge. I equated the river, with its ever-changing flow and character, with ecstatic feelings. Being here, the intensity of my knowing of this place all comes back to me, and I'm feeling it as much as seeing it. I'm recalling my childhood self with some pleasure. I remember existing as pure, unadulterated feeling, and that was both agony and ecstasy.

Yes, there was joy, but there were also unhappy times. As I walk down Hubbard Street past familiar houses now inhabited by people I do not know, old traumas surface having to do with my mother, with her expectations of me, and with the anger she felt toward me. She wanted everything I could not give and punished me when I could not give it. Partly to avoid my mother's wrath, I rode my bike and walked around a lot. I was always singing to myself, and my songs sustained me. I thought the world was like a song and that landscape was music. I didn't know if other people carried songs inside them. I just knew I did.

I knew what I was like. I had my songs. But I'm not sure what my mother was like. She had no songs, could not carry a tune, could not grasp the strands that a grown-up person must weave together to make a life. I failed her because I could not make her life for her nor could I protect her from a world where she did not fit in. But how could I help her when even my father couldn't help her? He stayed away, roamed the county for his job, and frequented the taverns where he could enjoy uncomplicated male company.

And to my mother's great dismay, I was always going away from her, following my songs, discovering byways that took me from her and from this place. She hurt me for going and for leaving her behind. What would eventually exist between us would look something like white-hot hate. And later it would look like an ocean, a watery space of lost time and feeling that separated us forever.

More than once, I left here for good, never intending to return. Now, it is somehow shocking to find that I like the person I was when I lived here. That girl was courageous, curious, hard-working, always trying new things, and expanding her horizons.

Arriving early for our first hike on the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Refuge, my husband, Jon, and I plan to walk the dirt road to the trail from what used to be the headquarters. The building is gone now, but for nearly thirty years, my father worked out of his office here as a game warden

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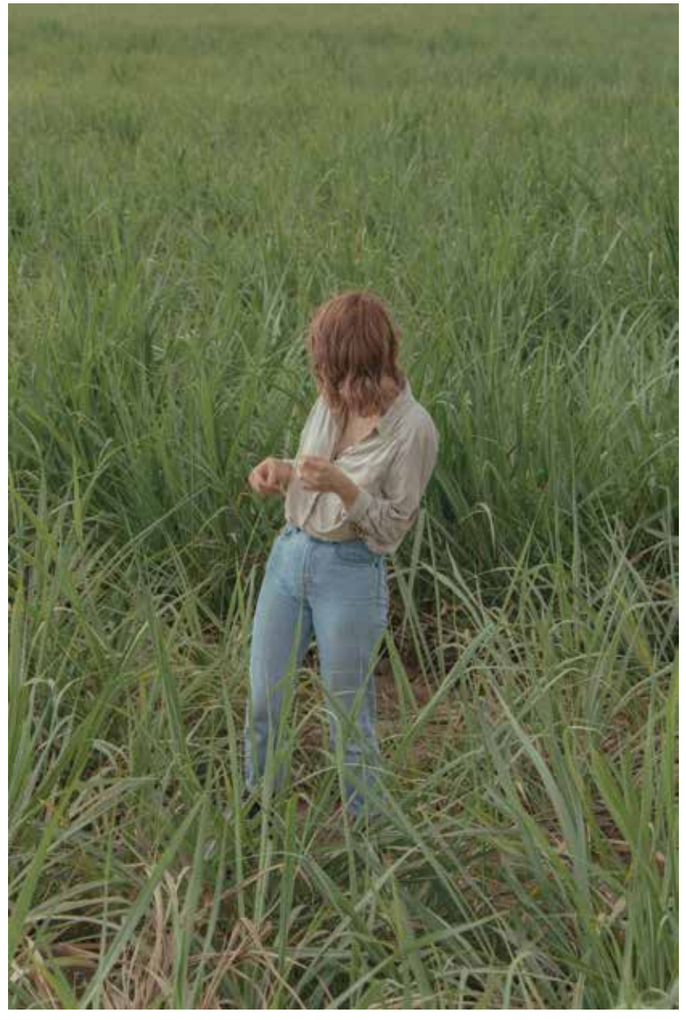
for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. I lived in Horicon from the age of five until I was eighteen. I returned to work as a lifeguard at the municipal swimming pool for a few summers while I was in college and after that, came only for short visits. There was a gap of eight years when I was in my thirties, then a return, and then, after my father died, estrangement from my mother.

And now I find myself once again up on "the hill." That's what we called it, and when I was young, it seemed to be a very large hill in the otherwise flat landscape, especially if I was trying to pump my bike to the top. From my adult perspective, and now that I live in the Green Mountains of Vermont, it barely seems a hill at all. Back then, my father sometimes brought me up here at night to watch the peat burn. During dry summers, fires smoldered underground only to rise in search of oxygen. When the burns surfaced, the cattails flared and were pushed back, creating open water potholes for ducks and geese. It was that kind of landscape—monotonous yet ever changing.

Our morning in the here and now is ethereal. This landscape is my landscape, the one I first owned in my soul, full of plants and animals. Catching the morning sun, the swaying grasses emanate an unearthly glow—beautiful—shining with dew like diamonds, studded with little points of light. A primal guttural utterance sounds from deep in reeds and weeds, and then, a pair of sandhill cranes rise to move off some distance before settling again.

After that, except for the crunch of our feet on pea gravel, it's quiet. We move down the far side of the hill through open country, then through shaded woodland populated by tall black walnut trees. At the end of this road was the deer graveyard. In the early days, part of my dad's job was to pick up car-killed deer. Their bodies were dumped here in a trench and bulldozed under. I imagine a future archaeologist dating these bones to the second half of the twentieth century and trying to make sense of this accumulation.

Turning right, we walk onto the causeway that takes us out of the trees and along the edge of the marsh proper. This trail wasn't here when I was a child. We could only access these areas by boat. As we turn onto the path that leads between bodies of open water, two wild swans—huge, white, and regal—swim slowly parallel to where we are walking. I spot white egrets, great blue herons, and several groups of small brown ducks, and feel elated. I've come home. And yet, I've had many homes and visited many places where I experienced similar feelings. It's just that this was one of the first places I called my own.



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Back on Hubbard Street, we park our rental car to walk around Stokely's, the canning factory where, as a teenager one summer, I worked the night shift. Derelict now, it's a mere ruin next to the railroad tracks. A barn owl loops in and out of an open window. Word is that someone has purchased the building and plans to renovate—a daunting task to be sure. I wonder what will happen to the owl.

The factory is about two blocks away from my old house and backs

up to the river. It provided seasonal employment mostly for women, who manned the husking and cutting machines during the corn pack. My job was quality control. I stood next to a conveyor belt watching a river of cut corn go by. If I saw something amiss, a piece of cob, husk, or worm, I caught and discarded it so that it wouldn't go into the cans. It wasn't a hard job, but it wasn't a pleasant one either. Juice from the corn ran from the belt onto the concrete floor. I stood in the sticky mess for hours. With no plastic gloves on offer, I worked with bare hands and fingertips puckering from the wet.

Most nights we clocked in at 7:00 p.m. and worked until the day's haul from the fields was gone. Usually we finished by midnight, sometimes earlier. Sometimes we started later and worked until 4:00 in the morning. It all depended on how much corn had to be processed. Each hour, we were given a ten-minute break. Usually, I used the time to go to the bathroom. Badly lit, with its concrete floor, toilet stalls, and mirrors, it looked like a prison.

When I signed on at Stokely's, I had just turned sixteen. I had my eye on a life that would be very different from that of my fellow workers—women who used their ten-minute breaks to sit outside in the darkness, smoking cigarettes, gossiping, and developing camaraderie by complaining about their husbands. They were all older than me, and I didn't feel I had anything in common with them.

Sometimes during break, I'd walk out to the loading docks for a breath of fresh air. Migrant workers from Jamaica packed the railway cars with boxes of canned corn. They wore white t-shirts and had muscular arms. Their white teeth flashed, and the ends of their cigarettes glowed red in the darkness. These men lived on site in barracks provided for the duration. They couldn't have earned much because their pay was docked for room and board. When the season ended, they left our town. I didn't know where they went. At that time, I didn't know where I was going either, only that I was headed somewhere that was not here.

I was willing to work hard. I wanted to say yes to life. I took risks to achieve happiness, to become the person I wanted to be. I could have settled here, but I didn't. I kept going even during times when I felt lost and depressed. And I see now that I managed to live well in Horicon despite what I was up against. I had to fight my mother and, in some ways, my father. I fought convention to follow my own path. My life began here, but it didn't end here.

The following day, on another exceptionally beautiful morning walk on the marsh trails, I find myself thinking about what a marsh is and what it is like. Except for a few islands where there are trees, the marsh is flat and featureless. Watery channels wend through the cattails. Dense stands of vegetation block any views and hide the horizon. Once you're out there, it can all look the same, and it's easy to lose your bearings. During my childhood, many people did get lost. My father would check the local bars before organizing a search party. Maybe that guy reported missing was truly lost, but he might have decided to put back a few before going home to his wife.

Amid so much surrounding farmland, the marsh is an oasis, a natural place in a cultivated world. While we're walking, four otters, seen

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in the distance across open water, swim toward us. They approach to within twenty feet, then raise their large heads and stare at us. They seem curious. Who are you? What are you doing? We stare back.

The otters dive, only to resurface a short distance away. A decapitated red-winged black bird with neck sinews exposed lies next to the path. Perhaps it was killed by a hawk or an owl. The predator ate out the rich, nutritious brains, leaving the rest of the body intact. Nearby, a pelican soars over reeds. Pelicans were not here when I was young, nor were there cranes. At that time, the otters had been trapped out. Much has been restored and regained through conservation efforts.

My dad saw this as a place for hunting, fishing, and trapping. I'm not sure he would have appreciated these hiking trails. He might have seen them as "gentrification" of nature. When he went fishing, he expected to eat what he caught. He wasn't a catch-and-release kind of guy. He would've seen no reason to hike for pleasure. But I like these amenities. Trails and a visitors' center allow people to enter this space and find out more about what is here, and what is here is really pretty wonderful.

Here in Horicon, I was a child and then a girl. I collected red maple leaves in fall and pressed them between the pages of our dictionary. I learned to swim and to paddle a canoe. I was in grade school and then high school. I did all the things I was supposed to do—attended church, finished my homework, and designed blue-ribbon projects for the spring science fair. I dated boys and danced at the junior prom in a long dress with a corsage pinned to my shoulder. I took the town, its people, and the surrounding landscape into my deepest self. I drank my fill. But I also rode my blue bicycle up to "the hill" just to be there and to see out over land that pulled toward the horizon. There was a life to be had here, but it was not my life, not the life I intended to lead.

Here, I knew a certain perfection, but even back then I knew that neither the town nor the marsh was a perfect place. The Horicon Marsh is a reconstructed landscape. At one time, it was flooded and turned into a lake then later drained in an unsuccessful attempt to use the land for agriculture. Finally, a group of conservationists set out to restore the wetlands. The dam across the Rock River just below my old backyard is key to the marsh's survival as are other ways of controlling and impounding water. Floods followed by water drawdowns keep the acreage from filling in and becoming brush or forest. The marsh is a work in progress, a managed landscape that couldn't exist without human intervention.

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When I lived here, I was a managed person. At least on the outside, I looked like a good girl, a popular A-student active in extracurricular activities, but like the marsh, I was also wild and somehow free. It's that freedom that connects me to the Horicon Marsh. It's the heron soaring downriver and the huge flocks of Canada geese that rise in a great web of motion in the fall. Even though the dam opened and the river's crest carried me far, far away for so many years, it's good to be back, to know this place again and to feel its spirit still within me.

I found this experience to be curiously painful but joyous at the same time. It wasn't just the radiant light and the hikes on the marsh that moved me. Being here shed necessary light into some of the dark places in my heart, so much so that they don't seem so dark anymore. I've always believed that we shouldn't bury the pain in our lives in darkness. That pain needs to be brought into the light and examined. To understand ourselves, we need to recall our personal narratives. We must recollect. I suppose it sounds silly to say that we need to face our fears, but yes, I needed to face my fears. I feared this place. I feared the past. I feared the feelings these would evoke in me.

And now, having spent some days here, I feel free. Horicon is no longer my home. I made homes for myself elsewhere. The things that happened to me here are in the past. But the way in which I lived in Horicon and survived Horicon are still with me. I can embrace rather than deny those years. I was a child, I lived as a child lives, and I lived well. I was someone here and I am someone now. And although these identities are separated by long years, loves, gains and losses, happiness, and the grief that is part of every human life, that child and this woman are still the same person. I am a whole. I am one. I have been a single kind of energy making my way through the world.