

### Where the Persian Flowers Grow

A box of cheap dishes came crashing down as I struggled to fit my last few belongings into the already heavy minivan. The job of packing was tiresome, and I paused to wipe the sweat from my forehead before tending to the fallen dishes. I could tell the vehicle was low to the ground when I stepped in, and I noticed only a few patches of clear window peeking out from the mountain of boxes as I looked in the rear-view mirror. My mother warned me not to over pack when I moved out, but I couldn't help filling the minivan with a few needless possessions. I justified this decision by telling myself a scrapbook dating back to the time my best friend and I were thirteen, a video tape of spring break in Paris, along with a blanket and some posters didn't take up a lot of room.

The Honda's engine groaned as I slowly backed out of the driveway. It was well into spring, and the lawn was a brilliant green against the blooming pink and white peonies which I had planted over the years. Few people in the neighborhood had peonies, but our soil gave birth to scores of large, fragrant blooms each year.

My mind was still on the sweet scent of garden flowers as I turned out of the Tiffany Shores subdivision and onto James Street. Perhaps that was the reason I quickly cut to Ottawa Beach Road, which ran along patches of blooming lilacs and magnolia trees this time of year.

I was familiar with almost every flowering bush and tree along this road, which had become my secret and inexpensive source for Mother's Day flowers. My brother and I would walk around Ottawa Beach Road every Mother's Day Eve, looking for the finest

blossoms hidden within the trees and shrubs of various properties. Then, with the darkness of night on our side, we would sneak out with pruners and a flashlight, stealthily riding our bikes to each site and clipping flower-laden stems and stuffing them into our plastic bags. The flowers were easy to find off this road, but soon our desire for more exotic blossoms would entice us to enter Waukazoo Woods, a hidden subdivision off of Ottawa Beach.

Many of my friends lived in the old homes of Waukazoo Woods, and I always enjoyed driving through the forest of beech trees to visit them. In the night however, the trees blocked out any moonlight. There are no streetlamps on Waukazoo Drive, and even my friends who live in the area will admit the dark and windy roads are confusing and slightly haunting.

I can remember a particular flower raid, when I found an attractive rhododendron bush beside the split in Waukazoo Drive, where a plaque stood to commemorate the history of the neighborhood. The subdivision is one of the oldest in Holland, and its name stands as a tribute to Chief Waukazoo, who led the Ottawa from Northern to Southwestern Michigan in a landmark case for land. In 1836, Chief Waukazoo petitioned congress for the land which served as his traditional winter hunting grounds. Reverend Smith, whom the Chief later befriended, helped the Ottawa acquire this land on the north shores of Lake Macatawa (what is now Waukazoo Woods), which became the first piece of Michigan territory legally owned by Native Americans. Smith and Chief Waukazoo's tribe settled the area, which fell victim to a severe winter, causing the Reverend to bury five of his children amongst the trees in the woods. Not long after, Chief Waukazoo succumbed to a lung infection, leaving his tribe leaderless when European trappers and

hunters settled the area, forcing the Native Americans northward. Now the only sign of their existence lies in the wooden plaque nestled within the flowering bushes.

I peered down the long road still shadowed by the surrounding trees as I passed Waukazoo Drive on my westward journey. The morning sun came flooding in as I turned a bend, and I fumbled to reach my sunglasses which had fallen out of the cup holder. My father's box of fudge sat in the passenger's seat, warming in the sun. I quickly moved the going away present out of direct sunlight, not wanting the chocolate to melt and later harden into misshapen forms. Making my way toward downtown Holland, I crossed the new bridge which stretches over quiet Lake Macatawa. The familiar "Welkom" sign greeted me as I passed the row of waterfront factories, reminding me of the Dutch influence on the city.

The town's ancestry is traced back to Dr. Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte, who founded the city of Holland in 1847, bringing with him a wife, five children, a maid, and one hundred and one eager immigrants. Together, they battled shoulder-high snow in the winter and malaria-infested swamps in the summer to establish a functional town. Log cabins and cut paths in the woods became colonial-style homes and bustling streets. New waves of immigrants from the Netherlands flocked to Holland, Michigan, creating a town steeped in the traditions of wooden shoes, windmills, and all things Dutch.

One hundred and sixty years later, Holland still exists as a primarily Dutch community. Driving down Eighth Street, I passed the many shops whose names begin with a "Van", boasting their owner's heritage. Little red, painted tulips can be found on all the street signs, and the Dutch obsession with cleanliness is represented in every well-manicured lot.

My Honda Odyssey rolled by the clean brick streets which lined the rows of shops, surrounded by islands of tulip stems. It was past May, and the blooming tulips were already long gone. Their colorful petals had faded and the wind had cast them away, leaving long, tall skeletons standing in the dirt. The stems stood as a testament to what Holland is best known for: its Tulip Time festival.

The Dutch have long been associated with the flowers they found in Persia, which were brought back to the Netherlands to cultivate and grow. Much like a child clinging to the comfort of a teddy bear, the Dutch brought their Tulips to Holland during their immigration to the States. A special day to commemorate the tulip wasn't created until April 1927, when a biology teacher by the name of Ms. Linda Rogers gave a speech to the Holland Woman's Literary Club, suggesting the annual celebration of tulips and the Dutch culture they stand for. Since then, thousands of tulips have been planted every year in Holland, culminating in an explosion of color lining every major downtown street in the month of May. The varieties are endless, and anything ranging from delicate miniature tulips with tightly held, pearly white petals to showy giants with ruffled, fiery orange blooms can be found throughout downtown. As the budding tulips push through the tough spring soil, the town of Holland readies itself for a week-long festival of music, dancing, and parades.

I was in the fifth grade when I first became part of the festival. My mother sewed me an authentic Dutch costume: a white apron held against a dark red and green striped dress. All of the other children came to class on May thirteenth in costumes, ready to march in the Kinderparade (the second of three Tulip Time parades). The girls wore different dresses representing separate regions of the Netherlands, and the boys wore

black vests with pocket watches. I remember the school buses bringing us to the parade, and how the roads had to be closed to let countless yellow buses pour out of every elementary school and into downtown.

Eighth Street had been transformed. Rows of benches and blankets littered each side of the road, and the smell of food stands cooking elephant ears and hot dogs filled the air. Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and strangers packed the streets to see the children of Holland parade downtown as they carried tulips, banners, or played instruments. I stayed close to my teacher and class, not wanting to get lost in the sea of people, instruments, and floats. The lineup stretched for miles as decorated horsemen, old-fashioned cars, and high school bands filled the spaces between different elementary schools, creating a line which began to snake through the spaces between downtown buildings. Our teacher gave us a basket filled with mixed seed packets, which we were to hand out to the crowd. I quickly flipped through the thin envelopes, looking for the best seeds to save for my parents. I found a package of purple pansy seeds which I tucked away in the bottom of my basket as the parade began and the band in front of us marched to the beat. The music from within the parade was almost frighteningly loud, and my ears had to adjust before I was able to detect the cheering which reverberated from the crowd. As I walked, I strained my neck in hopes of finding my parents' faces amongst the sea of people which flowed over the edges of the sidewalk. Finally, I caught a glimpse of them standing in front of the busy Peanut Store, and I ran in their direction with the purple pansy seeds in my hand. After a few quick pictures and hugs, I gathered the bottom of my dress with my hands and hurried back to the parade.

Today, as I drove down Eighth Street, the brick path which had recently been hidden under thousands of tennis shoes and wooden shoes alike now lay silent. The echo of rattling sticks against drums could no longer be heard reflecting off the rows of buildings. The only sound came from a group of House Sparrows, who flew from sidewalk to tree, quietly chattering. Yet downtown Holland had not become just another downtown. The store windows still bore their Dutch names, and although the petals had fallen away from the planted tulips, the ones which sat painted on the street signs still shone a brilliant red.

I came to the end of Eighth Street and turned on to a few more one-way roads. This led me to South Shore Drive, an old street that runs along the southern shores of Lake Macatawa. Expensive, massive homes line this road, and their huge frames blocked the sun, creating patterns of light and dark on the asphalt as I drove by. An old man walking his golden retriever waved as I passed and turned onto the street which he had just crossed.

I hadn't been on this road since three summers ago, when I spent the long and humid days with my back turned to the sun and my knees pressed into the soil. I received ten dollars an hour to travel around the shores of Lake Macatawa, tending to the oversized flower pots and sculpted yards of the town's most affluent residents. My friend and I worked alongside two other college-aged girls, and together we made up Nancy's landscaping team. Nancy owned a flower shop downtown, and ran her landscaping business during the summer months. She was tall, blonde, well-muscled, and hard working; a true Dutch woman. Holland had been Nancy's home for all of her life, and she had a rich knowledge of the town's history.

She was always full of stories, but I remember particularly well a conversation we had while digging up unwanted lily-of-the-valleys, rooted deep into a hillside property in Castle Park. Castle Park lay at the end of South Shore Drive, and its manicured grounds encompassed forested back dunes and a piece of Lake Michigan shoreline. The park consisted of various summer cottages owned by wealthy beachgoers from Chicago, along with a tennis court, general store, and a castle.

The lilies were particularly well anchored to the ground, and I had a difficult time concentrating on Nancy's story as the veins in my arms bulged from tearing at the labyrinth of stubborn roots. I paused to catch my breath and listen to Nancy continue her story on the history of Castle Park.

I learned that a man from Chicago built the ivy-covered castle in 1896, which he quickly abandoned because of a homesick wife. The castle was later found by a minister who bought the property to use as a summer camp, which he then sold to a nephew who planted some ivy and turned the park into a resort area peppered with cottages and women in white dresses. A man by the name of Lyman Frank Baum enjoyed his summers at the classy Holland resort. He found inspiration in the stone castle and nearby twisting, brick road of South Shore Drive, which he would later remember when writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. It was in the world of Oz that he would recall Castle Park as a castle in Emerald City, found by walking along a yellow brick road which spiraled much like the road of South Shore Drive.

Nancy insisted the general atmosphere of the private resort remained the same over the last one hundred years, and I couldn't disagree as I looked down from the hill at three ladies in sweaters, sipping tea from a golf cart. We sat for a while contemplating

this as Mrs. Campbell came to check on our progress in the seemingly infinite lily-of-the-valley field. She brought us cups of fresh lemonade, and I downed the refreshing juice, letting its sweet rivers trickle down my chin. Reenergized, I grabbed a trowel and continued the hard work.

Hours passed and the distant sound of Lake Michigan rolling over the beach became a cruel music to my ears. We were making slow progress, and I had to stop to put gloves on my blistering hands as I checked my watch. The sun was amplifying my pain, so I moved to a patch of lilies in the shade, near the edge of the woods. The large beech trees cooled the ground, and I rested my head against a sturdy trunk as I relaxed the strained muscles in my shoulders. My eyes became dangerously heavy when I heard a soft crunching of leaves behind me. A doe and her twin fawns appeared out of the forest, their slender legs poised in mid air, wary of my presence. I watched the mother's large ears swivel back and forth as her twins sniffed the ground and kicked at flies, less concerned with any immediate danger. Finally she retreated back into the safety of the dark woods, eventually followed by her spotted fawns.

During the car ride out of Castle Park, I told Nancy of my encounter with the deer. She had been pulling the weeds and watering the flowers of Castle Park for nearly thirty years, and never once encountered an animal bigger than the spiders and slugs which she was eternally brushing aside. As far as she knew, all wildlife had disappeared from the park when people first played croquet on the grassy lawn lying in front of the castle.



I caught a glimpse of the ivy-covered turrets as I traveled past the road which led to Castle Park. A bored teenager in crinkled swimming trunks stood at the park's entrance, waiting for his grandparents to catch up on their way to the beach. The weather was unusually hot this time of year, but I knew Lake Michigan would still be icy cold, not yet warmed by an entire summer's worth of sunlight. The best time of year to swim in Lake Michigan is August, when the air is hot and the water is a perfect balance between warm and cold.

I only visited Lake Michigan in August once last summer. It had been a blistering, sunny day, but the night brought a slight breeze that had cooled the scorching sand, making it pleasant to walk on. The golden beaches and dunes of Holland are covered in minute fragments of polished rock, and I kicked off my plastic flip-flops, letting my feet sink into the velvety sand. The sky was clear and moonless, turning Lake Michigan into a great black mirror which stretched out before us. David ran ahead and plunged into the water. His splashing disturbed the stillness of the lake, sending the noise of tossing water echoing between the tall dunes which lay hidden in the night. I walked to the shoreline where the sand grew wet and stuck one foot beneath the surface of Lake Michigan. The water was tepid, and I let the rest of myself fall into the gentle lake, which flowed over my skin.

We laughed as we played like children in a bathtub, splashing each other and diving in and out of the water. I had moved out just far enough so that only the tip of my big toe could touch the bottom when the lake was suddenly illuminated. We stood still, straining our eyes to catch a glimpse of the source of light. Another yellow beam swept across the water, running past the desolate shoreline, finding our eyes, and then

disappearing into the horizon between the black lake and sky. We could hear the humming of a motor before we saw the Coast Guard's boat appear a few hundred meters out from us.

The revolving beam of light continued to scan the surface of water when I suddenly felt shivers running down my body. I knew what the boat with the searchlight was looking for. Yesterday's paper ran a story about a sixty year old man who went swimming in Lake Michigan when there was a particularly strong undertow. He never came back, and now the searchlights were looking for him.

Bodies are always lost in Lake Michigan's waters, and many of them are never found, left to disintegrate and feed the lake that took their life. Three summers ago, two boats collided with each other just past the beaches of Holland State Park. Two young men lost their lives, one lost an arm, and another went missing. The Coast Guard spent days searching the lake, but the body was not found until weeks later, when a boy playing Frisbee stumbled across a gray corpse washed up on the beach.

Now as I looked into the dark water, I noticed there was not enough light for me to see anything below my chest. Trying not to think about what else lay hidden beneath the lake, I tightly wrapped my arms around David, seeking the comfort of another living body. I could imagine our silhouette standing out from the surface of the flat lake, periodically illuminated by the rotating searchlight which grew fainter and fainter. Finally the water around us grew too cold, and we were forced to let go of one another and head back to the beach.

Today the lake was choppy, and I could see little white caps forming over the bright blue water as I drove past the beach. It seemed as though the lake had no memory

of the people who swam and drowned in its glassy black waters. The road turned away from the shoreline, and I caught one last glimpse of the soft sand and churning waves before they disappeared behind a clump of maple trees.

My Odyssey picked up speed as I pushed down on the accelerator, turning onto the highway. A box slid off of the back seat, and my toiletries spilled out, littering the car floor. Not wanting to stop now, I chose to ignore them and instead picked up my cell phone, thinking I would call my friend who I had missed the chance to say goodbye to the night before. He didn't pick up, so I turned on the radio as I passed a truck in the right-hand lane. Houses and farms flew past my window in a blur as I drove down I-96, and for a split second I passed a sign facing the opposite direction. It was a new sign that I had never seen before, and I craned my neck to read its letters as the other cars rushed past me. The sign read "Holland" in bold, black letters, and an arrow pointed in the direction I had just come from.