

My mother's mother's mother was the Alma Hospital delivery room nurse for her first great-grandchild—me.

My mother's father was grandson of Liberty Tanner Beardsley, who, in 1837, hopped a Great Lakes steamboat from the East to Detroit. Afoot, he followed the Native American trails through Michigan virgin forest, . , ate and slept courtesy of the Ottawa Tribe. He built his cabin outside of Grand Rapids.

My dad named me Susan after his birthplace, Susanville, Cal. He grew up in Michigan during the Depression and collected bottles for money as a child and in high school and college paid the bills as a boxer and pool player. In WWII, he served as an ensign in the US Navy.

My parents lived with my grandparents in Alma. Then came the auto industry's Golden Age.

Dad hitchhiked down to Detroit to interview with Packard. His career took off, literally, and as he followed it we lived in Sioux Falls, SD and Battle Creek, Mich., and in suburbs of St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit. I went to college at the University of Michigan, majoring in French and Spanish (long story) got an MA in journalism at Ohio State University. I've had two husbands, both deceased, and gone through some name changes for my byline and books. I my third and last husband, Sonny Kleinfeld, in the Chicago bureau of the New York Times, and moved to his apartment in Greenwich Village.

New York City provides anonymity, maybe that's why I live here now. It feeds my curiosity and is constantly surprising. The cities and towns of my school years are file folders to keep my memories straight. The flat farmland of Central Michigan is where my extended family lived. I was the oddball new kid, but I was remembered and loved by the uncles and great-aunts and first, second, third cousins, who joked that the family stuck together like that endless array of marshmallow-topped Jell-O salads at the potlucks.

Cheerleaders Can't Afford to be Nice, gives the sad--and the humorous--sides of being a perpetual new kid.

ALL THOSE STARING EYES. I can't see them anymore, but I feel them and hear the teacher: "Let's welcome Sue Sullivan, from—" In the silence, I'd think: "I'm not here. I'm picking cherries in Grandma's back yard. In math, I'd be way behind or ahead. At recess, I'd scout out caterpillars in the brush by myself. After a few days, human faces had names, I had pals. But inevitably, Dad would come home with news "Kids, I'm being transferred." Or, "I'm trying something new."

ON THE HIGHWAYS THAT SPLIT THE ENDLESS cornfields, I'd travel out of the car and into a book. I was the characters, boy, girl, young, old, were me. I was Alec Ramsey befriending a wild stallion, Laura Ingalls braving out a winter in her prairie house, creative-genius Tom Sawyer conjuring up mischief. Or I was two people--pampered Nan and Bert Bobbsey, or two species as cowboy and horse or sensible rat and crazy toad friend.