

# *Chapter One* *Dewey*

Experience Is the Best Teacher





Looking back, I suppose I had a strange childhood, but maybe it wasn't that different from most. We moved around a lot. We never left Ohio and Michigan, but we rented a lot of apartments and houses and changed schools usually about once or twice a year. Those were extremely difficult financial days for a family with six children. We got settled, but then we got evicted or made an attempt to get a nicer apartment, and we would move again. Dad did his best working various jobs, but trying to raise six kids (two boys and four girls, with ages ranging from 4 to 15) must have been quite a challenge. And keeping track of us? Forget about it! We were wild kids from the get-go. Mom had just graduated from trade school as a beautician, and our first house in the city was a cute little one that I remember only vaguely because I was only 6 years old at the time.

But the beauty shop—Katy's House of Kurls! It was attached to the front of our house, and it was our playground. We rented the actual house and attached space for the salon, but Mom, along with some fellow beauticians, opened the business. We caught frogs and put them in the formaldehyde solution that "the girls," which was how

they referred to themselves, used to clean the combs and brushes. We laughed hysterically when one of the girls would open the unit for a brush or comb and scream at finding a frog instead. We begged sodas and chips from the customers; we would spin for long periods of time in the chairs and make faces in the mirrors. At Christmas time, the customers would bring presents of fudge and cookies and brownies and candy, and we would eat ourselves into comas.

Dad's best friends, aside from Mom's out-of-control brothers, were two men who worked at the gas station next door. Their names were "Gums" and "the one-armed man." Oh, I am sure they had real names, but I had no idea what they were.

My family used to spend Sunday nights gathered around the television to watch *Bonanza* and dream of having horses. Dad tells me now that Gums used to have a horse back then that he kept up at a riding stable in Michigan called Douglas Meadows. Every weekend, Gums would pack a bunch of beers in his saddle bags, ride all day while he drank, and eventually pass out on his horse. Dad tells me that the horse would then take him back to the stable, where the stable hands would put his horse away and let Gums sleep it off. To me, Gums was just a man with no teeth who drank a lot, but had I known he had a horse, I would have thought he hung the moon!

Dad used to sneak off with Gums and head up to Douglas Meadows to ride. My dad loved horses even back then. I loved the old westerns and used to say that when I grew up, I was going to have six boys and live on a ranch with a lot of horses. I had a photo of Roy Rogers and his horse, Trigger, that my dad had given me. It was my most treasured possession. I used to drive him nuts with the endless questions such as "What was Trigger called again, a Palomino?" and "How much do horses cost?" and "What was that thing that they tied to keep the saddle on?" I used to wear my brother's holster with the pearl-handled guns and pretend I was in a showdown at the O.K. Corral. There was just something about little girls and anything horses that seemed almost magical and still does today. I think it is universal.

One Sunday night—Palm Sunday, 1964, to be exact—we had all gone to bed after watching *Bonanza* and awoke to the sound of the tornado sirens blaring. My brother pushed me down the stairs and told me to go to the basement, but of course I froze in the middle of the living room in front of the big picture window because, suddenly, my ears felt like they were closing, and I heard a train. We didn't live near tracks at the time and the next thing I heard was my mother screaming, and then glass breaking. She was screaming because she was carrying my younger sister, and the attic door had come off and came down the steps and hit them. Mom saw blood and thought it was my sister bleeding but it was Mom's arm. The glass breaking was the picture window, the large plate glass one just in front of us, and I remember thinking how strange it was that the glass shattered in on us instead of blowing out.

Just as quickly as the tornado came, it was suddenly quiet again. Everything was ruined. The news crews came to the area and took footage, and neighbors helped neighbors. As we rummaged through our things, I found my photo of Trigger, wet and ruined. I was devastated. It taught me for the first time that life can be good, and then, in an instant, everything you worked for can be taken away. No one was hurt, but it was the first really bad thing that ever happened in my life. Jobs come and go, money was never ours to enjoy, but as a 7-year-old kid, devastation came down to that wet, torn photo of Trigger and Roy and the nightmares that followed that horrible night.

One Sunday, Dad told us we were going on a drive. This was his way of offering us something special in our lives without admitting that we didn't really have the money to do much else. We usually went to my grandparents house in Michigan or my Aunt Patsy's, but this time, we would do something so special that it would change my life forever. In the midst of all the chaos and the worry and the nightmares, we arrived at a place that was nothing short of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*. Douglas Meadows was like heaven to me. As we drove down the dirt road to the big barns, there

were people on horseback! Not characters on a television show, but real people and real horses. They had saddles and bridles and western hats, and the horses smelled so good! I stuck my head out the window and could hear the horses nicker and call to each other, and I knew at that moment that I wanted to grow up and live on a ranch just like that one.

A really nice woman wearing red cowboy boots met us at the car. I don't remember her name, but I will never forget those red boots! Keep in mind that we were not at all savvy to the rules of a ranch, and we piled out of that car like the wild bunch of city kids we were. We didn't have red boots; we were barefoot and filthy and running around like a bunch of kids in a candy store. We had never seen horses before, and now here we were surrounded by nothing but horses. Mom and Dad thanked the nice woman, who led us past the fancy people on the pretty horses to a large paddock. There in the paddock, standing all by himself, was a tall, white horse. He was the oldest, sorriest excuse for a horse that anyone had ever seen, but I can honestly tell you that he was the most beautiful thing I had ever laid eyes on. I cried at his beauty, because to a little girl who had lost so much, Dewey represented everything I had ever wanted in life. He had four legs, a mane, and a tail and beyond that, I couldn't have cared less—he was a *horse*!

As I approached, I noticed his eyes were blue, not clear blue or bright blue, but dead blue. The horse was blind in both eyes. He stood there perfectly still as we climbed all over him and squealed with delight. He didn't spook at all, as though he understood our excitement and our lack of experience. The woman said that Dewey was almost 30 years old and had taken care of a lot of children while they learned how to ride, herself included. She hooked a lead rope to his halter and had my dad pile four or five of us on his back. We were all very little, and Dewey didn't mind at all. She walked us around, and then once in a while, she got Dewey to trot for a stride or two as we screamed and howled. Then she let each of us have a turn by ourselves.

Dewey knew his boundaries within the confines of the paddock, and he gave me a gift that day that I will not forget for the rest of my life. It was a feeling of freedom that I had not known until that moment; the freedom of thinking about something joyful during a very frightening time in my life. When I kicked and clucked to him as the woman instructed, I held on tight and he cantered! For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like one of six poor kids from the city. I was riding a horse for the first time, and I was in heaven. This broken-down, blind, old horse made a little girl's dream come true that day, and he taught me that all things are possible; that although bad things happen, good things happen, too; and that I was a survivor. From this one horse, the first of many that I would have the privilege to know and love and learn from, came a lifetime of discovery that would begin on that day.

I still get excited every time I see a pair of red cowboy boots or an old photo of Roy and Trigger. Dewey was old, but his years of experience gave me that moment, and to this day, I smile when I think of him. I still associate freedom and joy with riding a horse, with the wind in my hair, and with my troubles behind me.

