

## **WE WERE KANSANS**

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**J**IMMY VILLANO'S FAMILY WAS FROM SICILY. He and his brother played the accordion and his dad ran the pizzeria on the corner of Colfax and Kipling Streets. They lived in the white house catty corner from us. On Saturdays Jimmy and Jerry got to go to Catechism at St. Bernadette's. Across the street in the house with brown siding lived the Rayors. The Rayors were Jews. They had rituals like eating Seder dinners and lighting menorahs and the men and boys wore yarmulkes. Once, on a Friday night, I was invited into their home to turn off all of the lights because it was after sunset on Shabbat and their tradition forbid them to do so. At the end of the cul de sac was a blonde brick two story home where the Olsens lived. Michael Olsen's grandparents lived in the little house out back of his parent's house but usually sat in the folding chairs on the front porch shouting German commands at Mike and his sister.

We, on the other hand, were Kansans. No, we didn't live in Kansas, we were just from there. There was no special dress to be a Kansan, no foreign tongue to speak, no musical instruments handed down that resonated of the old country. Our church didn't offer opportunities to memorize the rosary or attend Hebrew school. We didn't even have special recipes—just chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy on Sunday afternoons and a dreaded eight-hour annual drive to go “back home” to visit the relatives who remained behind. We were white. We were plain. And, we were Kansans.

Perhaps I should have been more grateful. It was likely the Kansan effect that caused me to want to learn languages and I did so quickly. I went to an out-of-state college where I hung out with the foreign students who drank strong coffee and smoked clove cigarettes. In class, I studied Roman Art and Archaeology and delved into thick hardbound texts written about places with real histories—just like the families in the neighborhood of my youth. I didn't visit Kansas anymore, but by the time I was thirty, I had traveled half the globe.

Then came Memorial Day weekend of the year 2006 and the 70th high school reunion of the class of 1936—my grandmother's class, and with transportation, a chance for her to go “back home.” I was living in Phoenix and was fairly certain that my husband could manage our three small boys on his own just this once. I caught a flight to Denver and a shuttle bus to Grandma's house. The next morning I loaded her unused Oldsmobile with a coffee thermos, a sack of green grapes, two sandwiches, and our travel bags.

The drive had never been memorable. Eastern Colorado flattened out before us and as our car hugged eastbound Highway 36; it, in turn, clasped the southern edge of Nebraska like a slide rule. With only one stop for gas and one to buy a chocolate malted milk, we arrived at Haddam, Kansas in the early evening.

I stepped out of the car into moist air that smelled of fresh cut alfalfa. Land scored into long rectangles in alternating shades of green and brown extended outward in every direction.

Aunt Avaline rounded us up quickly and we drove into town where the café still stood. Farmers wearing blue denim overalls and ball caps, branded with the names of seed or tractor companies, straddled stools at the counter. They shared coffee and stories of how they would hold out until the hogs weighed at least 240 pounds to get the nicest bacon, and they cussed at the radio broadcast crop report because the price of soybeans or milo had fallen. Along the opposite wall, Grandma and I joined the girlfriends of her youth. They were all widows' and had names like Reetha Mae, Orpha, Cletus, and Buelah. They spoke about their "handwork" and showed each other samples of the blanket they were crocheting for a new baby or the quilt they were stitching for the grandkid's wedding. Grandma bragged of her recent bingo jackpot, while the others lamented that the nearest weekend night bingo was now more than 20 miles away.

Relatives were called together for a potluck at Butch and Ida's on Saturday. Second and third cousins rolled in from towns and farms several miles away toting foil-covered casserole dishes. There was fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans covered with crispy onions, lime green Jell-O with carrots in it, and one of Cassie's homemade cherry pies. Everyone commented about how Granddad used to devour Jolene's tray of deviled eggs. We remembered one of my childhood visits when I was delighted that the barn cats had a litter of new kittens, and another time when my cousin and I set the hunting dogs loose on the raccoons in the cornfield. I recalled unplugging the television and going down into the cellar when the weather got bad and all rolled their eyes and gave deep sighs about how dry it had been this year.

The men talked of spreaders and road graders and no-till land and other conversations where the common denominator always seemed to be bushels per acre. The wives and girls around the table chattered of putting up tomatoes, which is possible without a pressure cooker, and discussed whether or not they'd be doing bread and butter pickles again this year. Kids seemed to prefer sweets and dills. If we were able to come back in the summer, we needed to be sure and try to bring peaches. Canned peaches were always good to have on hand. On the political front, Governor Sebelius, a woman and a democrat, had issued a pay raise for all Kansas government workers. This action alone seemed to indicate to them that Hillary could be an effective President and there had been some talk that she might run. Some knitted while they conversed. One of the uncles went out back where he rolled his own cigarette and smoked. In the late afternoon, the ladies removed their aprons and we sided with partners with a deck of cards for several rounds of Pinochle.

That night the reunion party was a big affair. The illuminated sign out front of the Dar-Mel motel in the next town over said, "Welcome Home Graduates." Grandma and Avaline had put their hair up in pin curls and made much ado over the dresses they would wear. Inside Haddam High School gathered more than 150 graduates from every year, including one gentleman from the class of 1920. They sang a round of the Haddam Hound's Holler and we ate smoked pork chops with green beans and scalloped potatoes from a local farm. I marveled at the 13 graduates of 1935 sitting together in the gymnasium like they were enthusiastically watching the school basketball playoffs. They were young people with grey hair and wrinkled faces. After the meal and the awards, the polka band ignited and Grandma and Avaline sat tapping toes while missing the dance partners who had died years before. On the way back to Avaline's, we rolled the windows down and listened to the rhythmic song of crickets or toads and watched the intermittent sparkle of lightning bugs.

On Sunday, we were going to visit the graves. Grandma loaded two grocery sacks of Avaline's plastic flowers into the trunk of her car. They were the same ones that she used year after year on Decoration Day—taking them out before the actual holiday and collecting them back up a day or two later. With Avaline and Gladys in the back seat, we drove past the now closed creamery where my great-grandfather had delivered milk. We saw the one-room schoolhouse carved from limestone that looked like a yellow Lego block set amidst the field. There, my grandmother had taught first through eighth grades in 1937, and, as proof, she was still receiving eight dollars a year from her pension. In town, there were old wood frame homes with large porches and paint flaking away like reptile scales. We proceeded to drive from Haddam to other ghost towns, like Blocker and Narka. Although abandoned, each retained a delicately manicured town cemetery where bright green grass was punctuated with marble headstones and pink or white peony bushes.

We found the Dovel plots, the Parrack plots, and a line of McLeod plots. "This one died when she was just a child." "These were two first cousins who shouldn't have married." "This one's marker gives the maiden name instead of the married name." There was a story behind each and I marveled at their recollection of the details. We carefully clipped back any encroaching grass. Grandma fussed through the sack for the right arrangement to set atop each one. At the last headstone she laid a carefully selected red, white and blue plastic bouquet next to the small American flag that commemorated her brother as a World War hero. She stepped back to admire her display and said, "There, now that looks pretty." I gazed down the rows of grave stones set in green against the blue Kansas sky. I looked at the three stooped white haired ladies in their print poplin dresses standing before me. Here, I realized that heritage, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder.

