

## **A Drawer Full of Memories**

Burnt toast, the smell of Folgers coffee in the afternoon, African Violets in the kitchen window, the San Angelo newspaper folded open to the crossword puzzle page on quiet evenings, carefully tended roses growing in front of a red brick house, sweet rolls baking in the oven, a drawer full of photographs saved from what seemed to be the beginning of time, a gentle rub on the shoulder expressing love far more eloquently than words could ever capture... these are the things that define her to me. She's been dead for almost a decade, but tears still stream down my face when I let myself remember that she's gone. Her name was Salina. She was my grandmother.

She wasn't one to talk about herself much. She had that sort of humility that great people seem to have, and I'd bet that she had no idea how great she was. Her reticence left me hungry for more; I never got my fill of her stories or assorted bits of wisdom.

She came to West Texas with her family by train when she was a girl. She told me that when she was on that train, she imagined West Texas to be the frontier, untamed and unexplored, the wild west of the era's folklore. She said that she dreamed of racing that train on a horse. Her eyes lit up at this imagined freedom, and I could see the rambunctious girl she used to be, at least in her dreams.

Perhaps because of her modesty and practical nature, my favorite photo of her is a picture of her with some of her sisters and cousins, still girls, taken in 1925. They are sitting with their dresses pulled up, exposing their knees. Her voice filled with adolescent glee as explained the risqué significance of the photo to me.

Most of her other photographs show how she was in the world. Picture after picture show her holding her children up to the camera. Some are in front of small wooden houses; a few are in front of the family car. But all share the barren West Texas landscape as the background. Life in West Texas in the 1930's, in the midst of the Great Depression, before most families could afford modern conveniences like washing machines or gas stoves, was a struggle. And she seemed to compensate for the harshness of life by taking care of everyone but herself.

She would have made a great spy. Neither my brother nor I shared the details of our love lives openly with other people, for example, but we always ended up telling her the pertinent details. It was a common experience to chat with her as she cooked or washed dishes, only to realize that I had just told her not only the name of whatever boy I was dating, but that I had also just given her a detailed account of what he looked like and what his interests were. She probably could have gotten a rock to tell her the secrets of its soul had she put her mind to it. Rumor has it that she even got her next door neighbor, Nannie, who kept her age a secret for decades, to tell her how old she was. The amazing thing is that even though she must have been prying shamelessly to find out this sort of information, she did it with so much finesse that people almost wanted to tell her their secrets.

Though she never went to college, she was one of the most educated people that I've ever met. When I was in graduate school, I used to sit with her at the kitchen table and talk about my research and some of the things that I was learning. When we did this, it was as if we were colleagues on the quest for knowledge together. I actually learned more in some of those conversations than I did from my professors. I still miss not being able to sit across from her and talk about my ideas with her.

"Tough as steel," that's how people described her. In some ways she probably was, though I'm not so sure that she felt her "toughness" to be all that strong. Once when I was staying with her and Papa, Donovan, my cat, got very sick. I was worried that Donovan might die and was inconsolable. Grandma had come out to the guesthouse to comfort me. We were sitting in the living area talking, and I couldn't stop crying because Donovan looked so miserable. And then she told me, "I envy your ability to cry. I can't cry." For that brief moment in time, I understood her life as I hadn't before. I realized that her strength was a double-edged sword.

I only saw her cry once, after she had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. It was during the holiday season, and the whole family was there visiting. She said that she was not feeling well and had gone to her room to rest. I went in to check on her a while later. As I stood in the hallway

watching her, I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. I wanted to comfort her but I didn't know what to say, so I quietly walked away. She died a few months later, and we never got to talk about what she was going through or what it was like to die. I don't know that she could have told me, but I wish that I could have held her hand and tried to talk about it, so that at least she wouldn't feel so alone.

My memories of her are like her drawer full of photographs. They are fragments of her life captured in time. When put together in a compilation, they reveal a woman who was wise, humble, loving, kind and strong. And, just as she treasured those photographs in her drawer, I treasure my memories of her.