

Well, I'm from Kansas

"We'll get gas in Iola, at Norm's. I want to see it again, anyway."

We were about 30 miles from my husband's Kansas hometown of Iola, returning after over seven years away, living in the beautiful beach town of Santa Barbara. I loved our Santa Barbara life for many reasons, but there was one reason enough. It wasn't Kansas.

I had always felt secretly scornful of Iola with its rusted gas jets ringing the entire block around the court house square, jets that had once burned brightly night and day from what was thought to be a never-ending supply of natural gas. They burned for less than 6 months. I loved to entertain my California friends with Iola stories – how the locals told me, with pride, how Iola was named for the first WHITE baby girl born in the territory. And about Chuck Chilcoate, the local celebrity, who had appeared on The Ted Mack amateur hour doing his birdcalls, who followed me on my first visit to Iola, darting in and out of buildings, doing those birdcalls. About the town's only restaurant where nobody talked about the quality of the food, they just said, with great pride, "the steaks hang off the plate." After all, I had a right to fill a bit superior. I, too, was from Kansas, but Wichita. Wichita was a big city. George and I had met at Kansas University where we fulfilled one of the cliches of our generation, homecoming queen marries football captain. And now we were returning for our first visit, our two small children in the car, full of pride in the sophistication of our new life as Californians.

We pulled into Norm's. As far as I could tell, it still looked the same. Same three faded- red gas pumps, same stand of weeds coming up in the concrete drive, even the old white container, now

abandoned, that had once held soft drinks, Grapette, Dr. Pepper, Orange Crush that we called generically, "pop." I could remember just how it felt to put your dime in the slot and then fish your chosen bottle out of the water, water meant to be cool, but usually tepid, even tepid water feeling cool in the heat of a Kansas summer.

Norm, himself, came out of the little office, wearing his striped shirt (was it still the same, too?) with NORM embroidered in red on his pocket. George got out of the car. Norm showed no surprise when he saw him. It was as though seven years had not passed. George stood with him as he started filling our tank, still no words, no greeting had passed between them.

There was a long silence. Then Norm said, he must have looked at our license plate, "I see you live out to Califormee. Did you know Howdy Smith? He moved out to Califormee."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. Howdy Smith. Lived out by where 54 crosses over 81, out by the cement plant. Howdy Smith. Died in his sleep the other night. 2 a.m. Give a little moan and died."

There was another long silence.

Norm continued. "Your mother died in the yard, didn't she?"

George spoke his only words. "No, in the house."

He got back into our car, his jaw muscles working as we drove out the circular drive.

We were back in Kansas.

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