

Madelyn Frye

## The Village of Royal

The village of Royal was in the least farmable part of Illinois. The area was swampy and flooded easily. No one thought it could be farmed, but the immigrants from Ostfriesland in the plains of Northern Germany claimed the area. Because of their knowledge of farming, they put drainage tiles underneath the fields and turned a swampy area into seemingly endless fields of corn and soybeans. Each year, they alternated the seed planted in a field. If in the previous year the field grew corn, they planted soybeans; the soybeans put nitrogen back into the soil, which helped make corn grow. The drainage tiles are still underneath the acres of farmland around Royal.

I saw the fields change color for years outside my grandmother's patio. Just beyond her backyard was her acres of farmland that was short and bushy one year, then wavy and tasseled the next. I used to sit at her kitchen table in the fall, watching the hired farmers run the combines during harvest time. The television was cranked up to a volume of thirty on the kitchen counter across from Grandma's chair. Even though the TV was on in every room, she didn't often watch. My grandmother poutsied into the kitchen and sat down in her chair at the head of the table, closest to the patio. She clasped her hands under her chin and nodded in approval toward the farmers. She not only knew the village of Royal before cars and electricity, but she was the last villager to know Plautdietsch.

Everyone knew Plautdietsch in Royal when the village was first established. Their dialect translated to flat German or low German. Children went to school to learn English. The church sermons were conducted in German, hymnals sung in German, business deals made in German, men courted women in German, children scolded in German, and neighbors laughed in German. God forbid if an Englishman came into town, everyone was talking about him in German. If he was selling something, then he was even more suspicious because the only quality items Plautdietschers bought were from other Plautdietschers.

My grandmother, Antke Margreta Ostebur, walked to school three miles along the road with her little brother, Raymond, in tow. She sat in the classroom listening to the teacher talk in English. More often than not she was waiting patiently to ask the girl next to her what was going on up until the fourth grade. They learned arithmetic, cursive, and grammar until it was time to harvest the fields. When Antke Margreta got older, she pushed the plow in the field behind the horses and milked the cow before the sun came up.

One time she didn't see the cow raise her back leg. The cow spooked and smashed Antke Margreta's nose crooked. The bucket of milk toppled over, seeping into the packed dirt of the barn. She was rushed to the doctor to have her nose reset. Her face was bruised and swollen for several weeks. It was never set properly, the tip of her nose just a hair off the center of her face. She was lucky she could still breathe through one nostril and partially in the other. Even as she aged, the hump in her nose didn't take away from her beauty and spunk.

When Antke Margreta was twelve and Raymond was five, they watched as the Englishmen came to set up the transformers at the farmhouses all around the area. The Englishmen shuffled through their farmhouse, installing wires and outlets. Every room got an overhead light. The outlets installed accommodated the newer kitchen equipment already being used in the city. For the first time, Antke Margreta was able to milk the cows in the barn under a lightbulb. Her family was one of the first to get electricity around Royal.

Plautdietschers were expected to marry Plautdietschers. My grandmother was the exception. Unlike all the other Plautdietscher women in Royal, she liked her sparkly earrings and bright lipstick. She may not have traveled off the farm unless for church or school, but she made sure her hair was done for anyone who might come by. At church, she wore her best dress and rhinestone shoes. She had to be the spiffiest woman in the congregation. If she didn't know Plautdietsch, she would have been pegged as a city dude.

She married an Englishman who was a sales representative for a tractor company. When Lawrence Wantland came up the lane toward the farmhouse, Antke Margereta's mother told her to stay in the house and not talk to him. My grandmother was going to talk to him the first chance she got. They stood on opposite sides of the fence talking until her mother called for her. Antke Margreta and Laurence must have hit it off because he went to the tavern in downtown Royal to ask the locals about her. As soon as he spoke her name, the whole town was up in a tizzy.

I only knew Grandpa Wantland in the faded pictures that my mother took. He passed away a year before my parents adopted me. My mother said he was a lot like my father—charismatic and easygoing. Grandpa Wantland used to sit at the head of the table where Grandma sat. Grandma Anna ran around him, ready at a moment's notice to light the cigarette in his mouth. He read the newspaper waiting for Grandma to serve dinner. It

was Grandpa Wantland, Grandma Anna, and my mother who sat at the table together. Aunt Penny, their eldest daughter, had her own family to serve dinner. Grandpa Wantland and Grandma Anna gossiped about the latest news in Royal as my mother ate. The children were not supposed to interrupt the grownups.

When it was my mother, my grandmother, and I sitting together during my teens, they wanted to know how my day was at school. Grandma sat across from me smiling, holding her wrinkled hankie in her clasped hands against her chest. She nodded at me with a blank look, often prompting my mother to repeat my story with a loud voice next to Grandma's ear. Grandma Anna responded with an indignant huff: "Oh, for crine out loud, I can hear just fine."

Downtown Royal was just a couple buildings during Grandma Anna's prime. There was a general store, a grocery store, a bank, and a tavern. The men went to the tavern after a long day working in the fields to gossip and share bawdy jokes. The grocery store was owned by a man who put your items on a tab. Plautdietschers could walk in and collect their groceries and pay for the groceries later. The street of downtown was a long dirt road littered in streaks from the buggy wheels and hoof tracks. Towering over the downtown were grain elevators—metal silos that stood like upright pencils.

During the fall, the farmers harvested the fields and pulled their wagons full of corn to weigh them at the grain elevators. The price of corn and soybeans fluctuated from day to day. Some days, not a single kernel of corn was seen in the downtown. Other days downtown Royal looked like Wall Street. The wives and children ran around with baked goods to bring to neighbors. It was a chance to see others besides church. Everyone was dressed as good for the Lord as they were for being seen downtown.

The farmers I knew looked different than the ones my grandmother knew. The grain trucks lined up along Main Street during harvest time. These trucks look like semis with gold kernels peeking over the top. My mother told me to avoid downtown while the farmers were scrambling to get their grain in before the next rain. Some were planning to sell bushels of corn the same day of delivery. The farmers dressed in overalls and dusty ball caps except for Sunday, which called for nice dress shirts and clean blue jeans. We'd hang around after the sermon, socializing in the church basement.

At dusk during harvest time, I saw the lights of the combines in the fields. When my mother and I were driving in the car on our way to Royal, we could hear the distant whir of the combines. She rolled the windows down and slowed enough so she could watch them. The dust and pollen kicked into the air in cloud puffs against the purple sky. Every year, my mother always said, "Idn't that amazing? They're harvesting corn that will feed the world."

When Annie and Lawrence got married, they married in the newly built church. The church was originally out in the country, and the

Plautdietschers decided to bring the church into the town for convenience. Brick by brick, the church was transported into Royal. Plautdietschers crowded into the church to see the Englishman marry one of their own. They got to see Antke Margreta Ostebur walk down the aisle in a shiny taffeta dress embroidered in sequins.

The farmhouse went to Raymond and his wife, and my grandmother received a house along Main Street as a wedding present from her dad, Fred Ostebur. Her father fixed the house alongside his son-in-law before the wedding. The Plautdietschers made sure to stop by the house frequently to keep an eye on the Englishman. They planned on later reporting their interaction with the Englishman to other Plautdietschers after the Sunday sermons.

Almost ninety years later, the church was packed once more for the baptism of Annie Wantland's grandchild from China. It was standing-room only on the first and second floors. My baptism was scheduled in early summer, yet there was an unexpected heatwave. For almost a century, St. John's Lutheran Church had electricity. It was beside me why no one in Royal thought about installing air conditioning once it was invented and before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I was buttoned into a white polyester dress and held by my father who was a walking waterfall of sweat. My writhing in his moist arms and guttural vocalizations did not go unnoticed. The pastor said, "I can tell she's gonna be a good singer," before leaning me back into the basin and christening my head with holy water.

While Lawrence worked with his father selling tractor parts, Annie decided she liked doing hair. She drove to the Champaign School of Cosmetology every day until she got her license. Every time she returned, she brought more of the city into Royal. She was the ritzy farm girl who, without a second thought, opened a salon in Urbana near her grandfather's home.

Lawrence left for the war along with the other able-bodied men to fight on the beaches of France. He was put with the Civil Engineer Corps. Annie relocated Ann's Beauty Shop to her home when he left, attempting to keep up the morale in Royal. As part of the war effort, everyone gave up the tires on their cars. She gave birth to her first child, Penny, in the middle of the war.

In Grandma Anna's letters to Grandpa, she reported on the state of Royal and Penny. It wasn't until he came home that he saw Penny for the first time. The neighbors always wanted to hear how Lawrence was doing. Annie had to write down the things people wanted to say to him. Lawrence's letters came sporadically as he moved with his platoon into France. At night after Penny went to sleep, Annie turned on the radio while she read Lawrence's letters. He told her about his days in the foxholes and where they had been. He couldn't wait to eat her cooking again, and he thought about Penny. It was always a treat when they got cigarettes and new shoes. There were times when the war felt overwhelming, and he asked her not to share his letters with their friends.

Lawrence came back to Royal after the war and was welcomed by the Plautdietschers as a hero. They wanted to know about the war. Lawrence dodged the questions with quick quips. Only Annie knew what was in the letters. She saw him jump in the study at firecrackers and sputtering engines.

It was a good thing he didn't die during the war because my mother wouldn't have been born. By the time she came along, more Englishmen had assimilated into the community. Royal was a small village that had a distinct identity from the other villages of Ogden and Flatville. The Ogden and Flatville folks were all right. Everybody knew everybody, and someone was a relative in each village. St. Joseph, though, was a whole other world. There were some relatives that ended up living in St. Joseph, but the St. Josephers were a bit too city dude for the villages.

A nurse named my mother Candace when she was born. Grandma Anna wanted to put Candy Wantland on my mother's birth certificate, but the nurse told her that she needed a nice, stately name for a birth certificate. "Put Candace on the birth certificate, and call her Candy as a nickname," the nurse said. To all the Plautdietschers, my mother was known as Candy. Outside of Royal, she was Candace.

My mother refused to let anyone call me *Maddy*. She made a point that we'd be referred to as Candace and Madelyn to people we met. I asked her once why she didn't want people to call me Maddy. She liked the name Madelyn, and it was my name. Maddy was not my name. I learned to have a temper at the utterance of Maddy and politely correct people in the least awkward way possible. My mother felt belittled by her nickname and wished that away for me. For all the places she'd been, the little moments that made the sky more vast and people more beautiful, she was still Candy to the Royalites.

In all the pictures of my mother as a child, she looked like a freckled Shirley Temple. Annie made sure Candy had permed hair from infancy until high school graduation. She made sure that Candy showed up the St. Josephers with her gussied hair and sense of fashion. Candy went to school in jackets with real fur cuffs and lapels. That was something I had in common with my mother and grandmother when I entered St. Joseph-Ogden High School: I was always dressed snazzy. I turned my nose up at the thought of wearing Uggs and a sweatshirt. My Aunt Penny had gone to college to be an accountant and got a job at the bank in Royal. The general store and the grocery store were gone by this time, driven out of business by the IGA in St. Joe. The tavern and the bank were the only active buildings downtown.

My mother met my father through his mother. After some letter writing while my father was stationed at the air force base in the Azores, he sent her an engagement ring in one of her Portuguese slippers for Christmas. Less than a year of knowing each other, they got married. Candace and Mark hopped from air force base to air force base until they came to Chanute in Illinois. The air force base was close enough to Royal

that my mother bought the old grocery store building and renamed it Candy's Hair Salon. She serviced all of Annie's clients, children, and the children's children.

Some women came in every week. Other times she saw clients once a month. She sat the husbands down in her chair and trimmed their hair as they chattered about work. People who watched my mother grow up stopped by to check up on her. They always wanted to hear about Mark. When I came into the picture, everyone wanted to hear how Madelyn was doing.

Grandma used to sit on the telephone speaking Plautdietsch with women on a party line. As my mother grew up, the number of people Grandma Anna could talk to in Plautdietsch got smaller until everyone she knew from childhood was gone. She sat on the phone speaking to Aunt Penny or my mother in English, looking out her patio door. The view hadn't changed much over the years, but I wondered if she felt lonely.

The church sermons were no longer in German. Long before I was born the sermons were in English. No one spoke German, let alone Plautdietsch anymore. However, every Christmas Eve people held candles in the pews, standing shoulder to shoulder. The acolytes in their red robes walked down the center aisle with their torches lit. They lit the first candle of each row, and the next person in the row tilted their unlit candle toward the lit one. Once everyone's candle was lit, the lights in the church went out so the alter was lit by Christmas-tree lights. At the center of the nativity scene was a painted wooden sculpture of the infant Jesus. We sang by candlelight "Stille Nacht" the way Plautdietschers did ninety years ago. There was one Christmas Eve when a pastor was invited to give a short sermon in German. I never heard another German sermon in Royal after that winter.

At night when my mother and I stayed with my grandmother, it was boiling hot. Grandma was a dictator when it came to her thermostat. She raced down the corridor with her walker if she knew my mother or I touched it. Grandma may have not had good hearing or vision, but she knew when someone messed with her thermostat. I'd see her dart past my room faster than what people thought she could move to make sure the house was nice and warm, even in summer. When I saw her walk past my door again, she had magazines and a sippy cup piled on the seat of her walker. Grandma would smile at me, saying, "Toot, toot. I'm goin' dancin' tonight." She called her walker a buggy.

My mother sometimes got up in the night while everyone was sleeping so she could turn down the thermostat. On these occasions, she heard Grandma talk in her sleep. Grandma sometimes talked in Plautdietsch. Neither my mother or I could understand it; there was no one left to speak it with, and all those words were locked in Grandma's head. Grandma was the only Plautdietscher, and everyone else was a Royalite.

If Grandma Anna was the equivalent of a Royalite J.P. Morgan, I was a rock star and my mother, an actress. Everyone knew when we were in town

before we arrived. People made sure to stop in at Annie's house to see Candy and Madelyn. These people knew my mother because they either went to school together or watched my mother grow up. People walked up to me many times, and I had no idea who they were. I didn't ask their name for fear of losing face. After the sermon, my mother would walk behind me whispering into my ear the name of the person we were approaching and their relationship to our family. I had a general understanding of the person by the time we went up to greet them.

I spent middle school and part of high school learning with Royalites and St. Josephers. Some rumors got back to me that I was from the UK and went to a boarding school on the East Coast. They also thought I was rich. I wasn't going to object to those rumors since I happened to like them. One time, I expressed my love of learning with a French saying, which one boy responded, "We speak English here."

Having roots in the community didn't make being the only Chinese child in a fifty-mile radius any easier. Children told me I should be cut open to confirm I wasn't a robot. I was going to be a bad driver. Children asked me to say *flied lice*. They ignored my opinions even though my intelligence was exceptional. Through the grapevine I always heard that children thought I was nice to everybody. But nice doesn't make you accepted. Being the granddaughter of a Royalite J.P. Morgan didn't make children friendly.

I was told frequently by older Royalites I was going to be a hairdresser like my mother and grandmother. They sat in the lounge area of my mother's beauty shop talking about the harvest or the latest drama with the church affiliation. I sat at the reception desk drawing pictures while I waited for the phone to ring or a client to pay. My mother looked over at me and just smiled. "Yes, she would be very good," she said. Following my mother's example, I smiled, even though I didn't want to stay in Royal for the rest of my life.

As a ten-year-old sitting at the reception desk in the middle of summer, I knew I wasn't going to be a hairdresser. Something inside me told me I was going to be more than that—more than an outsider. It was hard to convince insiders what I knew in myself when they'd never experienced the distance I had traveled to come to Royal and become part of Grandma Anna's dynasty.

I moved away in the middle of high school to the West Coast where the culture was surrounded by trees instead of fields. That was the beginning of the end of a dynasty. Back in Royal, the fields changed the way they had every year, but the people changed around them. No one held the same American Dream the Plautdietschers had when they first made the area home.

When Grandma Anna died, I couldn't see her off to heaven. My mother flew home to be with her in the final days. She watched my grandmother's face wither away and become sallow. Grandma Anna confused the nurse for me and lit up every time she came to check the machine. Toward the end, Grandma was greeted by all the Plautdietschers

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as she entered heaven while my mother watched her eyes dart back and forth at the hallucinations in the hospice room.

When I think of Royal, I think about all the times I saw my grandmother at the head of the table in the afternoon light and the stalks of corn at the end of her backyard—the humid nights fighting over the thermostat. Although Royal might have grown sleepy and let the past drift away, Grandma Anna refused to forget what her mother and father wanted when they came to America. I look up at the sky now and see the same sky I saw in Royal, the same sky Antke Margreta saw.