**THE POWER OF PLACE: CHRISTMAS EVE, 1956**

*“*Is there no respect of place

Persons, nor time in you?”

William Shakespeare,

*Twelfth Night*

I tell people now that I grew up in a cornfield. It gives me an air of countrified distinction in this era of cosmopolitan and sophisticated cyberspace. Yes, I’m proud to have come from humble beginnings.

The farm where I grew up in Indiana was only 40 acres, not nearly enough even then to be profitable. The nearest farm house was nearly half a mile west, where Mr. and Mrs. Gerard lived, and it was nearly a mile to the next nearest house, where Mr. and Mrs. Gerard never lived. Except for my siblings, I had no playmates until I went to school, and even then I had none nearby until I got a bicycle when I was 12 years old, which is when my geography expanded by ten miles.

But I soon discovered that I could travel in my mind to many places, either places I had been or places I could make up. I liked real places and times better. For example, I am now a ten-year old boy down at the bridge throwing rocks at a can floating northwest in Killbuck Creek, and the farther the can floats away the harder it is to hit with the rocks. I see the garden weeds growing along the sides of the creek and the black mud on the banks, which used to be green weeds themselves.

So my story relates to the elderly and loving couple who lived in the nearest house to us, nearly one-half mile west. They were Otto and Emma Gerard.

They were so old that my father, in the summer, had to mow their yard about every two weeks. They were so lonely that they had to have me come to their house while he mowed so they would have someone to talk to. He called her “woman,” as in, “Woman, get this boy a cup of water.” She called him “Toe,” as in “Otto.” Neither of them had been outside Delaware County. Neither of them had ever tasted a coke, and they always wanted me to tell them how it tasted. Then, I was too cornfield timid to enhance my recitation. Now I would say, “I shook the Coca-Cola bottle up real good, popped off the cap with my teeth, and chug-a-lugged it, and then got the true taste when I started regurgitating.” But this is a Christmas story.

They were so old that they celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary, and about ten people (who were still alive) came over to their house. They were a sweet and loving couple who were role models, as we would say today. We always visited them on Christmas Eve, as their son seldom saw them, so far away in Chicago. We would take them a gift, and they gave us ice cream, which they bought just for our occasion. They made us feel real special, and we all knew it was something they looked forward to. Our real gift was to be there.

Then I got old enough myself that I could mow their yard (people didn’t have lawns then). I carried in coal for them, I cut their weeds, which probably never became mud. I even drove them to the grocery store. Ergo, I got to know them well. (Mr. Gerard said “ergo” a lot.)

After I went to college, my younger brother, Robert, mowed their yard and helped with their chores. They got older and older. Mrs. Gerard had a stroke and their only son, who lived in Chicago, came down and put her in a nursing home. They said she couldn’t talk. The son, whose name was also Robert, hired a lady housekeeper to come live and care for Mr. Gerard, who soon fell and broke his hip. Mr. Gerard’s mind may have been slipping, as my brother would tell me things like, “Mr. Gerard thought there was a horse in his bedroom and wanted me to give it some hay.” I guess his brain got old and didn’t work so well. His forgetter, however, worked very well.

Robert, his son, not my brother, had him put in the same nursing home as his mother. They had separate rooms, of course, even though they had been married now for 62 years. Neither knew the other was in the same home, as they both had lost their ability to communicate, though for different reasons. Who would die first? This was the unspoken thought when we visited them in their separate rooms. Our visits became fewer and fewer because they did not recognize us. First we would visit Mrs. Gerard, because her room was nearer the entrance, and then Mr. Gerard, who was up on the second floor.

I had just gotten back from college, and now it is Christmas Eve, 1956. My mother said, “We need to go see the Gerards. We don’t know how much more time they have on this earth. We owe it to them; they always enjoyed our Christmas visits for so many years.” I said, “I don’t want to go. It’s a waste of time. It’s depressing, and it won’t do any good.”

Well, I finally agreed to go. We all went.

When we arrived, we met Robert Gerard in the parking lot. He had just arrived, in the snow, from Chicago. We all trudged in to fulfill our obligations.

With the white snow crunching under our boots and our breath also blowing white, we all were determined to fulfill our Christmas mission properly. With our heads stoically held high and with dutifully solemn expressions and with respectful silence, we entered the Hartford City Nursing Home, as if it were a funeral home. No time for joking about drinking cokes.

Then I did something for which I am forever proud. My cornfield isolation and meekness turned to brashness. I blurted, “Let’s have them bring them together in the same room.”

The general dread of the visit became a bonfire of warmth, as I repeated myself in my plan for reconciliation of these old dear friends. I said, “Let’s have them…” My father interrupted: “Hey, what’s the harm? For gosh sakes! Yeah, let’s ask the nurses to move Toe down to Emma’s room.”

And just like that, it was done. They were side by side in two separate beds, even though they had been married 66 years.

Well, they started babbling as we strained to hear. Mr. Gerard called her Emma, and she actually spoke, saying something about how he had fed the hogs. To them, we were not in the room. They were back home in their farm house in Delaware County, not in a nursing home seven miles away. They were transforming time and space by reliving events of their happy past. What they actually said didn’t make much sense to the rest of us, but they were comfortable with one another. And Emma Gerard could speak! Sort of. That’s the power of place: they moved themselves, if only for a little while, back into their old house, which had in fact been torn down. I guess they could see their furniture, the pictures on the wall, the green grass outside (which I used to mow), even though it was then a snowy Christmas Eve, 1956.

And Merry Christmas to the Gerards, who still in my mind live in that same old farm house just half a mile from my favorite cornfield. This was and is the real cyberspace.

Merry Christmas to all in 1996.