**UNCLE OTTO’S EXTRA CHRISTMAS**

*And nothing can be called our own but death.*

William Shakespeare, Richard II

The biggest word I ever had heard back then was said by my Uncle Otto. He said it with one foot resting on the running board of his brand new big blue 1948 Pontiac, while talking with my father in our barnyard driveway. It was Christmas Day Eve, as they call it down South, or the day before Christmas, 50 years ago. It turned out that Uncle Otto died two days before Christmas Eve Day 40 years later, or ten years ago. Here is the big word he said: "As-a-matter-of-fact.”

I asked my dad what that word meant. He said, “It doesn’t mean anything.” He was right.

My mother told me when I was older that, even though Uncle Otto never married, liked the ladies and would take them into town and drive them around in his new cars, always Pontiacs. Sometimes they spent the night in town.

Uncle Otto lived with his mother, Grandma McCreery, until she died at age 97 in 1969. Then he came to live with my widowed mother. Before the War, Uncle Otto worked in a factory that made automobile gears, and before Christmas he would always take an extra job playing Santa Claus, usually for Ball Stores, the big department store in downtown Muncie, Indiana. But after the War, he was a kind of farmer. He raised a few hogs, milked the cows, and did odd jobs around the farm. He had graduated from Harrison High School in 1926.

When I was a kid, I remember, Uncle Otto was a talkative, lively person to be around. He had an old baseball glove, and we would play pass or shoot baskets at an old basketball goal on the garage. On walks he would tell me which McCreery brother planted which tree. On Sunday afternoon visits to Grandma McCreery’s house, he always seemed to be around us kids rather than the adults.

As I grew older, I found him more and more silent. My mother said it wasn’t me. It was just that he was more comfortable with children than with adults.

In fact, as an adult, I found him absolutely taciturn and indeed eccentric. Although he had an economic role to play in the household—to take care of his aging mother by cooking, cleaning, and generally looking after things—he played no social role. On the Sunday afternoon visits, which continued even after I finished college, Uncle Otto was as much in the room as the overstuffed chair in which he sat reading Zane Grey novels.

Once, when I saw him heading down to the barn, I opened the door to his off-limits room and snuck in, probably the only other person to have entered the room since he moved in with my mother 15 years before. His bed was neatly made, everything in its place. His closet had some old suits that he must have worn before the War and his Santa Claus suit, which actually looked rather new. Most of the closet contained his everyday overalls and various shirts. He was a simple man.

He was also quite independent. Some mornings he would get up and take a day trip. No one asked him where he went. Especially around Christmas he was gone a lot, I figured just walking among the shoppers and maybe talking to some kids. He had lost his mother, my grandma, over Christmas.

Unexpectedly one morning, I got a call. My mother said Otto had died that morning of a heart attack. It was three days before Christmas.

I flew to Indianapolis and rented a car.

The burial was in Thompson Cemetery, three miles west of Gaston, Indiana, which is surrounded by soybean fields owned by my cousin Michael McCreery. The ceremony was uneventful. My mother had to get her preacher to say a few grave-side things, which was only slightly awkward as Uncle Otto never went to church.

I was already looking forward to getting back home the next day, when I noticed that Uncle Otto’s casket was perched over a hole dug in the wrong place. I said, “Mother, I thought Otto always wanted to be buried at Blanche’s feet (Blanche was his already-dead older sister). Mother said, “Why, yes.” I said, “Look, they’re about to plant him in the wrong place!”

At this point, only a few of us remained lingering, and three guys in the background were idling at a discreet distance, waiting for us to leave so they could lower the casket and cover it over.

My cousin, Frieda, who hadn’t spoken to anybody the whole day, not at the funeral home and not at the cemetery, became irate and indignant that our Uncle Otto’s at-Blanche’s-foot wish was not being honored. In other words, she got mad as a wet hen, as Uncle Otto used to say. Although I doubt she had said one word to Uncle Otto since she was a teenager, which was over 15 years ago, Frieda determinedly took up the cause with self-righteous wrath. She strode toward the three workers and demanded a new hole be dug. They timidly explained that they only dig holes and fill then in where the sexton tells them to. “We can’t do no new hole without his say so,” said one.

Finally, it was agreed that they would not fill in the hole (Uncle Otto was still perched on top of it) until I called the sexton. Frieda, who had passes the Indiana State Bar Exam but who couldn’t get a job because she couldn’t get along with people, went home with her mother to brood. (She later became a judge adjudicating matters of labor disputes, a job in which she did not have to get along with anybody.)

The rest of us went back to Mother’s house, where the church ladies had brought in all kinds of food, and we had a leisurely meal, lots of conversations among all of the relatives, as Uncle Otto had no friends to join us. Meanwhile, Uncle Otto was perched above the wrong hole, being guarded by three workers.

I couldn’t reach the sexton, who was rabbit hunting. He later explained to me that there were no plots in that old part of the cemetery and that his probe found an empty grave, which he said should have been good enough. After all, he said, “I only take one dollar a year for this job.”

I finally reached the funeral director who reluctantly agreed to come out to the cemetery and take Uncle Otto back into town. His job, he said, was simply to deliver the body to the cemetery. Some of us went out to meet him.

He showed up in his station wagon, and we loaded Uncle Otto inside. Before the funeral director could leave, my brother-in-law Bill asked him, “Are you going to keep him refrigerated?” The answer was “yes.”

And so Uncle Otto went back to town where he spent the night (actually two nights, including Christmas), this time with no lady friend to keep him warm. Uncle Otto got an extra Christmas.

Postscript

The reburial was to be the day after Christmas, Saturday that year, at 11 a.m. There would be just five or six of us to see Uncle Otto put in the right hole. We got to Thompson’s Cemetery about 10:30 a.m. to find Uncle Otto’s casket resting on the grass near the station wagon. Frieda, the languishing lawyer, was on hand to inspect the hole and assess its location. All was well.

I glanced around and saw lots of cars coming into the cemetery and realized that another burial was about to take place. More and more cars pulled in, and I wondered who was this important person being buried in such an obscure cemetery.

The crowd came toward us. The highway to the cemetery was clogged with cars.

I stepped up to the first couple who approached and said, “You have the wrong place.”

The man held up a newspaper whose headline read:

BALL STORES’ SANTA TO BE BURIED TODAY

It turned out that Uncle Otto had been playing secret Santa at ball Stores all these years, including this one. People he had held on his lap, from some now in their late forties to young children, were here. The *Muncie Star* had uncovered who the real Ball Stores’ Santa was, something even his own family did not know.

Merry Christmas and an Extra Merry Christmas, Uncle Otto!