

## **“SPOTS OF TIME”**

I was nine years old when my mother sent me to stay with Grandpa and Grandma Bridgeland that summer. I had seen little of my grandparents in the years before, and I pleaded with my mother not to send me there. My grandparents were old, I complained. I wouldn't be with my friends at home, and there would be no one for me to play with; but I begged to no avail. Our circumstances were such that my pleas could not have persuaded my mother. She worked for our living and there was no one to look after me when I was not in school. So it was to my grandparents that I went.

As things came about, that visit was not at all as I had feared. It became a charmed summer, a summer from which I carry with me still golden memories; a child's memories that seem to me to have about them a numinous quality, memories that still seem surrounded by an aura of significance impossible for me to articulate clearly, but after all the years that have passed, I feel deeply still.

My grandparents lived in Bellville, Ohio. Bellville was then a little town on State Route 13, one of those small towns you might find many places along the old two lane state roads before the super

highways came in and changed things. What the towns people called “Main Street” was just a stretch of the State highway running for a couple of blocks where the town’s businesses fronted.

My Grandpa Bridgeland had a business there on Main Street that was a gathering place for men in town. I can still see the old style red letters, edged in gold, he had on the front window announcing his business: “Bridgeland’s Pool Room,” they read.

By today’s standards, Grandpa’s place didn’t look like much. It was housed in an old single-story wood building built before the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, such as you could still find then on the streets of small Ohio towns. Antiquated and unserviceable as it would seem to us now, the old structure served well enough in those years. The old building was torn down after Grandpa retired, but he made a good living from the business while he had it.

Grandpa allowed me to hang around his place that summer, and I often did. I remember there were two pool tables in back where some of the men played and others sat around watching, with their heels hooked into the rungs of the tall chairs placed against the walls, arguing about baseball and Roosevelt, and occasionally leaning over

to spit tobacco juice in the direction of the spittoons that were placed on the wood floor near the chairs, and bedded in sawdust as a precaution.

Pool, and male fellowship, were the main draws, but not all that Grandpa's place offered. The men could sit at an old wood counter to drink beer and eat hamburgers. Years later, my son and I came to Bellville to find the graves of our ancestors, and found still living, an old man who had frequented Grandpa's place. He told us how he remembered that "Frank Bridgeland served the juiciest hamburgers anywhere." This was, I suppose, because they were especially high in fat, something no one would have cared about in those days.

There were other things on offer, too. There were shelves stacked high with tobacco products; cartons of cigarettes, boxes of cigars, and pouches of chewing tobacco. I remember the place was redolent with the smell of tobaccos. Also, that when one of the men bought a cigar he might give me the ring that was around it to put on my finger.

Of special interest to me were the candy display case, and the old metal freezer with ice cream. I still think of the unstinting size of

those candy bars that cost you only a nickel, and can feel yet their heft in my hand. In those days, ice cream came in just three flavors, chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. No matter. The modesty of this selection served well enough for those simpler times, and no ice cream has ever tasted better to me than that in the chocolate cones Grandpa occasionally let me have.

Grandpa did not have much formal education, and I don't remember him being different in outlook or interests than the men in bib overalls and heavy shoes who came to play pool and eat at his place. What I remember most about him, and what did make him different, was that he had presence. As young as I was, I could see how the other men respected him. He was what we call a "man's man," and I see now this was partly what drew men to his establishment. Grandpa didn't talk much, but when he did the men listened. He had deep set dark eyes that looked straight at you. With that straight look, he made a man know he was being foolish, or out of line. Things were lively at the pool room, but never raucous. I was cowed by him, and tiptoed in his presence, so to speak, but there was that about Grandpa that made me like being near him.

Though I longed to ask him for candy and ice cream from the treasures he had there for sale, I knew right from the start that I didn't dare, so they were golden moments when, without my asking, and him not saying anything, he lifted one of the heavy freezer lids, scooped ice cream into a cone, and held it out to me, or when, on rarer occasions, he reached into the candy case, and took out for me one of those big candy bars. These mute offerings reflected the silent understanding there was between us. I knew without his ever having to say it, that we were to live together on his terms, but that I was to be embraced by him within them.

I remember how this unspoken understanding was tested one day. My way of eating a cone was to lick the ice cream off the top, and I was standing in the pool room looking wistfully at the empty cone in my hand wishing there was more ice cream in it, when one of the men playing pool looked up from the table, and seeing me standing there, said to me, "listen Jimmy, you just take that cone over to your grandpa and tell him to fill'er up!" As much as I longed for more ice cream, not even the moral support of the men standing around watching moved me to use this man's suggested ploy with my

Grandfather. I just lowered my head and mumbled something to the effect of not wanting more ice cream just then. Though but a child, I knew well enough that it would not be wise for me to approach my Grandfather in that way; and, too, that it would somehow dishonor our relationship.

My grandparent's lived not far from town in a house Grandpa had built. There was a garage in back with an attic, that Grandpa always referred to as the "barn," though so far as I know he never lived on a farm, and that was where he housed the big black Dodge automobile he bought then seldom found occasion to drive. He had a large vegetable garden behind the "barn," and a chicken coop to one side of his garden that housed a big white rooster and a brood of hens.

When in the afternoons business got slow at the Pool Room, Grandpa walked back to the house to tend to his garden. I can still see him there among his crops, moving smoothly and efficiently up and down the rows as he hoed, pausing now and again to lift his old straw hat with the black band to mop the sweat with his big red bandana. I can still remember, too, how good things from that garden

tasted. There were “roasting ears” as Grandpa called his sweet corn, big red plump tomatoes, melons, and green beans that I refused to eat at home, but did at Grandpa’s and Grandma’s.

Hunting rabbits was something Bellville men still did in those days and Grandpa kept a hunting dog, a beagle hound named “Spot” that he took with him and the other men when they went out hunting. Spot had his house next to the chicken coop, where Grandpa kept him chained to a running wire. I did not have a dog at home, and playing with Spot was one of the high points of that summer in Bellville. When I unhooked Spot from the chain that held him prisoner so much of the time to play with him, he leaped and jumped wildly to show his gratitude, and, no matter how I tried to cover myself to avoid his joyous leaps, he always managed to kiss my face with his slobbering tongue. There was something else I remember about Spot too. He could sense when trains were coming through long before I could hear them. I remember how he would stiffen suddenly in our play, listen, lift his nose to the sky, form his mouth into a round “O,” and let forth a long mournful bay. He became oblivious of me as he did this, and seemed transported to some other place, to be communicating with

something beyond my ken. I knew, of course, it was the sound of the far off locomotive, but still his long mournful cry seemed other worldly to me, as though he were bewailing something lost.

Berries were in season when I was in Bellville, and Grandpa took me out with him to pick. I remember how we went along dusty back roads where the bushes caught the best sun and picking was good. We filled our baskets with big plump blackberries, and with the clusters of elderberries whose heavy heads swayed toward us as we stood there picking on the side of the road. Our baskets full, we brought them home to Grandmother. I remember Grandma Bridgeland as a plump woman, who wore her grey hair pulled back tight in a bun, and looked at you solemnly over her round wire-rimmed glasses. She was a quiet woman, and what I remember most about Grandma Bridgeland was that she was a great cook. She baked into succulent pies those berries Grandpa and I brought home to her. I remember that her pies had lattice tops and flakey crusts, and how the slices stood firm and full on your plate as you ate them.

Some Sunday mornings Grandma might say she wanted to cook a chicken for our Sunday dinner and ask Grandpa to bring one in. I

remember the trepidation with which I watched as he went out to the chicken coop to get it; how he stooped through the low door, and I heard the alarmed clucking and fluttering of the frightened birds. Then, how he emerged holding by the legs the lurching chicken he had chosen for the sacrifice, swing it with a practiced ease on to the chopping block, and bring down the hatchet he held in his free hand with one perfectly aimed blow to cut off the struggling bird's head. What happened next astonished me. The decapitated chicken did not lie dead, as I thought it must. I was awed to see how when Grandpa let the bird fall to the ground, it ran about with blood squirting from its headless neck, as though it did not need eyes to see or brain to guide it. When the headless chicken finally fell, Grandpa picked it up, and plunged it up and down several times in the kettle of scalding water he had made ready to loosen its feathers. Then he began the plucking. If any of you have experienced the smell of wet chicken feathers, you know how revoltingly bad smelling they are. I can still smell the malodorous air that rose from those sopped rags of dead chickens Grandpa held aloft as he plucked.

But as squeamish as I was about all this, I recovered from those killing mornings quickly enough. Maybe we have inherent capacity to accept that nature is cruel, and to disassociate the way we kill animals from our enjoyment of eating them, though I'm not sure that's true of all of us, especially if one should have occasion to see the killing deed happen. What I do know is that witnessing those grisly killings on Sunday mornings did not stop me from relishing the drumsticks I ate on Sunday afternoons. Sunday chicken dinners at Grandma's were looked forward to events, and for me they will always be at the top of my list of remembered feasts.

Grandpa gathered black walnuts every fall and brought them home where he scattered them among the rafters of the barn, where they laid until they dried and their green hulls fell off. The crop from the year before had dried when I came to Bellville that summer, and I went into the attic, climbing hand over hand up the wood steps nailed to the inside of the barn wall, and brought down some of those walnuts. Grandpa kept his work bench in the barn where he also had his garden tools. He had a vice screwed into one end of the work bench and I used it to crack the shells of my walnuts. Cracking black

walnuts this way is not easy. They are not like their English cousins with thin easily broken shells that allow the kernels to fall out whole. I learned I had to be attentive and place the walnuts in the vice in just the right way. If I placed them wrong, or applied the wrong pressure, the vice either crushed the meat, or the shells cracked in pieces in a way to make the meat inaccessible. You had to get the feel for it, and I remember I got pretty good at cracking black walnuts that summer.

There was something else that drew me to that attic in Grandpa's barn. It was purple martins. There was a window there that looked out over his garden where he had set up a martin house on a long pole that raised their house to eye level with this attic window. Standing there with the window closed, I could watch through the glass these birds dipping and swooping in graceful turns as they flew about the martin house, and then came to perch on the wire Grandpa had stretched from their house to the lower frame of the window where I stood. Were the window open, I could have easily reached out and touched them. Birds, as you know, are wary creatures, and I was excited to have them sitting there so close to me. Watching these beautiful martens, the males' feathers iridescent in the

sunlight, entranced me, and surely began the interest I have had since that summer in birds.

Grandpa liked to play cribbage and he taught me to play. In the evenings, he would get out the cribbage board, the pegs and the cards, pull up a low table in front of the big arm chair he always sat in, with me seated on the floor opposite him. I remember how he never eased up on his game to let me win because I was a child, and when I learned enough about playing cribbage so I did occasionally win, he gave me my due as he would have any opponent who had played well enough to best him. This accepting of me as an equal made me feel worthy, and that Grandpa and I were companions, not just an old man and a boy, but real friends.

Grandpa was a Cleveland Indians fan, and when at home he listened to the broadcasts of their games on a big Philco radio that sat next to his arm chair. I didn't know much about professional baseball when I came to stay with him, and have not been much of a fan of the game since; but I took an avid interest in baseball during that summer I was with Grandpa. I liked the way he talked to me as we listened, as if I were capable of having discerning opinions about what was

happening in the game, and the warm feelings this sharing of interest fostered in me. Today, I could not tell you much about who plays for any of the major league teams, but I can still remember many of those who played for Cleveland back then; that it was Lou Boudreaux at short and Ken Keltner at third who we could depend on as clutch hitters; that we were surely going to win when Bob Feller was on the mound with his fast ball; and that Frankie Pytlak might no longer be the great hitter he was, but how we forgave him for not getting on because we thought he was still the best catcher in the League.

It was from Grandpa, too, that I learned something about the broadcast of these games that amazed me. It was that the sportscaster did not go to other cities to report Cleveland's away games; but that he broadcast the action by taking rudimentary facts sent over a ticker tape, and embellishing these with details he concocted on his own. I can't remember that sportscaster's name, but whoever he was, he made you think that he was there at the game, and he made us feel that we were there watching too. I sometimes think now how much more radio contributed to the development of our capacities for imagination than TV does today.

Grandpa also followed the evening news on his Philco and listened always to Lowell Thomas. I didn't understand much about what Lowell Thomas reported about the news, but his grave tone made it seem important to me, and I liked especially the way he always ended his program - "So long until tomorrow" he always said, and how this made me feel he was a good guy, and that he was my friend.

Thomas was followed by Walter Winchell, and Grandpa sometimes stayed tuned for him. I can still hear Winchell's opening line and feel the sense of urgency he gave to it. Some of you will remember his, "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America, and all the ships at sea!" I wondered what that "all the ships at sea" business meant. I can see now that Winchell was early among those newscasters who aim to seduce their audience by sensationalizing the news. I could tell Grandpa didn't like Winchell so well as he liked Lowell Thomas, for he often switched Winchell off.

Like so many of the men in Bellville, Grandpa chewed and I don't remember a time when he did not have a pouch of Red Man or Beechnut in his hip pocket and a cud in his cheek. He kept a spittoon

at his right foot next to his big chair by the Philco, and leaned over from time to time to squirt a jet of juice into it. When the good had gone out of his cud, he let it fall into his hand, then reached over to drop it into his spittoon with the rest of the mess. I liked the sweet smell of the moist tobacco as he dipped a fresh chew from his pouch, but the rest made me queasy until I got used to it.

While Grandpa sometimes brought me into his activities, he never interrupted these to provide entertainment for me. That an adult would think himself responsible for finding a child “something to do” would not have occurred to him. Except for meal time and bedtime, I was left free that summer to wander as I would. There was no overweening concern for my safety in Bellville, and no need for it then either. Many of the summer days of my visit were passed in wandering alone about the town and out into the countryside beyond.

In those days the B&O had a rail line along the Clear Fork River and a station at Bellville. Trains have a special fascination for most boys, and I was no exception. Hearing the steam whistle sound, I sometimes ran to the station and out to the tracks to put my ear to a rail so I could hear the sound there of the train’s coming. I remember

how, as the great locomotive rounded the bend and looked toward the station, the single eye of its headlight seemed to regard me for a moment, find me insignificant, then turn away to roll on by as I stood looking up at it. How small that mighty iron behemoth made me feel as it puffed past me, with its piston arms moving to slow its iron wheels, and its panting boiler exhaling its last great gasp of steam as it brought itself to a stop!

Once I put a penny on a rail to see what the locomotive rolling over it would do to it. When the train had gone, I searched for and found that penny lying there between the tracks flattened and split nearly in two. Lincoln's head was driven so far into the flattened copper he was no longer recognizable. I still remember how that broken penny bespoke to me the wonder of the machine's great weight and power.

In the years not long before I came to stay with my grandparents there was a saw mill on the edge of town. This was operating during those last years the lumber companies were finishing up their clear cutting of America's trees, and there were still enough left in outlying areas to make it economical to haul logs to Bellville to be cut into

lumber. The mill was no longer operating, and the machinery had been taken away. What remained that attracted my interest, was an enormous saw dust pile left in the yard by the operation. The thing must have been 20 feet high, or so it seemed to me. I liked to feel my feet sink into the warm sawdust as I clambered up the side of this massive pile to stand on high, as a monarch surveying his world below. After a few such climbs though, I found there was a big downside to this monarch of the mountain game. The sawdust got in my drawers, and the stuff wouldn't shake out. After a few such excursions to the top, I decided the itching and scratching the climb cost me was too big a price for feeling I was king of the mountain.

Some days I went to explore where the Clear Fork River passed under the town's bridge. The river ran low in the summers, and big rocks under the bridge trapped water into pools. I went to peer into these, for if I looked intently enough into the clear water, I might see schools of little minnows, their translucent bodies barely visible against the pebbly bottoms, and their tiny fins vibrating at their sides like little wings. At my slightest movement, these diaphanous creatures would instantly disappear, and in a twinkling reappear in

their same still formation in a new place. The quickness and precision of their movement seemed magical to me. Enclosed there out of the sunlight in the deep shade of the bridge, with the dank smell of wet rocks around me, I felt as in some preternatural world. Few cars traveled the road to Bellville in those days, and if an occasional one did pass over the bridge the echoing thrum of its tires fading away only intensified my sense of the mystery of the place. The experience awakened in me the feeling that I was at the threshold of some larger reality, something latent that was there around me, and was on the verge of being revealed, something that seemed to embrace me within it. It was a strange, but somehow a comforting, feeling.

There was another day of that summer when I felt in the embrace of some mystery. Where it was exactly I cannot remember clearly now, but I had been wandering beyond the town, for I recall I was sitting on a grassy bank looking out over fields with golden rod and Queen Anne's lace. It was a sunny day and warm. There was an incessant chirr of grasshoppers in the air around me. Their steady chirring lulled me, and I was sitting there half dozing, when, suddenly, their chirring stopped. A hush fell over everything, and all was

suspended in what seemed a foretokening quiet. At that moment, the feeling came over me again, as it had before under the bridge, that I was on the threshold of something larger than myself, something limitless. What I felt sitting there in the stillness inexplicably gladdened my heart.

I've often wondered about these memories from that summer so long ago. What was there about them that makes them return so vividly still; those "spots of time," as William Wordsworth called them, those moments he saw as flashes of paradisaical vision, those memories that remain with such "distinct preeminence" in our minds? Just what is it that invests them with their aura of significance? Does the luminosity that still surrounds these childhood memories, especially those feelings that came over me when under the bridge and sitting there on the bank, the sense that I was on the threshold of some mystery about to be revealed, point to something beyond the grasp of intellect, but nevertheless real? Or does my felt significance of these memories come only from my imagination, is it merely something that I impose on them? This is a possibility I must acknowledge, given their subjectivity.

My daughter, a nurse who has some formal instruction in these matters, tells me that we remember things to which we have had, to use the term she gave me for it, a “heightened emotional response.” Perhaps that is so, that we remember what was exceptional in its power to move us emotionally. Children, it would seem, are especially prone to such moments, and to regard their world with wonder.

I think my memory of my grandfather himself may remain so clear to me, so vivid still, because I never saw him change. He died when I was yet a boy, so my memory of him was not diffused, was not disbursed by time, as it has been with others I knew for a longer time and in changing contexts, those I saw altered. He remains with me still like an old photograph, stopped in time.

Perhaps there will be a day when we will come to know enough about the intuitive side of our natures, so as to be able to bring out of the shadows of memory, and reveal to our intellects, what now lies hidden from us there. Or, it may be, that these memories that seem so numinous to us will always remain only metaphors, symbols for what the soul longs for, but cannot know, those “depths of feeling into

which we cannot peer.”\* Perhaps, but feeling, too, is a way of knowing, and may, in the end, be the truer way.

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\* T.S. Eliot