

Last Hand

A Suburban Memoir of Cards and the Cold War Era

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Introduction

Where Are You From?

I looked at my watch as I waited at O'Hare International Airport for my flight to Germany. It was almost time to start boarding the plane. It was the 17th of November, 2000. The presidential election, which was held ten days before on the 7th, was still unresolved as a result of multiple recounts and lawsuits. The United States stood on the brink of a constitutional crisis—the country was completely polarized by politics. I stood up to board my plane. I was flying coach, as I always did for the long journey overseas. Computer bag over my shoulder and garment bag in hand, I joined the line filing onto the plane. I didn't particularly enjoy long flights. I picked up a newspaper and made my way down the aisle toward the back of the plane.

After finding my seat, I stowed my garment bag in the upper compartment and my computer bag under the seat in front of me, thus ensuring that I would have no room to move during the nine-hour flight. I took my seat by the window and began watching other passengers locate their seats. Some struggled with their luggage; some appeared cool and calm, as if they travel every day. Others seemed relieved that they made it onto the flight at all.

I enjoy observing people when traveling. Train stations and airports always intrigue me in that way. Each person walking past me or sitting near me has a story entirely their own. Where have they been? Where are they going? As with every flight I catch, I was curious as to who would sit next to me. I can usually spot

him or her as they search for their seat. Time would reveal soon enough whom it would be.

A woman in her midforties approached my row. As her eyes scanned the row numbers along the aisle, there was a look of recognition in her eyes when she arrived at my row. She identified a spot in the upper compartment to deposit her bags, and squeezed into the seat next to me. I began to read my newspaper, which detailed the election debacle. I allowed the woman to have the armrest, which won me a smile. I returned the smile and looked back down at my paper.

There are generally two types of travelers you'll be seated next to on a plane: outgoing and talkative, or quiet folks who keep to themselves. When I heard her say, "It's crazy, isn't it?"—referring to the newspaper, I knew which type was sitting next to me.

"Yes, it is," I said, as pleasantly as possible.

"I'm Kim, by the way."

"Tom, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too. So, where are you from?"

I'm not one for small talk usually until I get to know the person a little better. There were two ways I could answer her question. I could answer with a simple generic location, or go into some detail about where I really came from. I opted for the easier of the two, and let her do most of the talking. Besides, I was always curious about other people's stories, and I never gave much thought to my own story. For some reason, however, her question remained in my thoughts, especially as I looked at the newspaper.

Where am I from? Not from this damn place, certainly, I thought.

A Forgotten Place

I come from a place that still exists in name, although it's changed enough that it's only a distant relative of its former self. Some of my contemporaries have assimilated well into their "new" country and surroundings. Not unlike the case for any new immigrant that comes here, it's taking time for me to adjust, as well. Every day it seems like I have to adapt to something new—I believe I'm adjusting well, but there are times when I long for the "old country." That country disappeared, along with the cold war and the emergence of a new world order. Most of my family didn't make it through that transition.

The place I came from was a land of proud people. Geographically and politically speaking, we were separated from the other half of the world, so the populace had a tendency to look inward. We didn't have as many distractions then as we do today—we didn't have cable TV or the Internet. There weren't any cell phones or Palm Pilots. You could speak your mind more freely—it was a time before political correctness made people hypersensitive about offending anyone. Communities were tight, and people were—for the most part—friendly. Because there weren't as many distractions, many families spent more time together than we do now. Mine did.

One thing my family used to do together was play cards. Once fairly common, it's a pastime hardly anyone enjoys anymore. Sometimes, if we had enough players, we'd have multiple games going at once. Almost all my relatives played the game, but none so passionately as my immediate family. I really wish I could play one last hand with them. But, that time has passed.

Because I live in a country of constant change, it has become a different place today than it was when I was young. As time passes, it will continue to change. I'm still here, and the place where I grew up has the same name as when I was born. However, it's most certainly a different place today. The landscape is different. The people are different. The culture is different. The community is different. The clock can't be turned back. And in some ways, I guess that's a good thing.

Before my memory fades and I forget how things used to be, I want to describe the place where I came from, as I remember it. Someone else will probably come along and write their own version of history, but this one is mine. And my story is a story of family, community, country, and a forgotten game of cards.