

*Red Summer*, by Travis A. Wittwer 2005.05.11

Every day, rain or shine, the house stood on the hill, looking down upon the neighborhood. Back in the early 1800's, the owner wanted his house to be away from everyone so each timber and plank, window and door, pipe and nail was dragged slowly by horse up that hill. The town has since stretched out to meet up with the base of the hill. It always seemed gloomy up there, even in mid-summer. Cold. Damp, the earthy smell of mold and age surrounded the house.

The house was an angular, Gothic structure with a large copper weather vane that seemed to pierce the sky. Many of the shingles had fallen off and lay dead on the ground. At night the place seemed to come alive when the wind blew the ancient, gnarled elm trees back-and-forth, scratching the sides of the house, removing in patches what was left of the paint. In areas not touched by the tree, the paint curled back, resembling alligator skin. Shutters often clacked—tah, tah, tah, tah, tah, tah—like the dead sending messages to the beyond.

Shards of glass hung in the windows like teeth, glistening in the moonlight. An eerie, evil grin the result of neighborhood boys with rocks on quiet summer nights. The tree branches, brought to life by the wind, clawed at the house as if trying to open it like an egg. When the wind stopped, the fingers rested, outstretched to the sky. No houses sat on either side. This had as much to do with the geology as it did with the fact that no one wanted to live near old man Mc Grueder's. Each generation has lived in that house, died in that house, been buried behind it. In the evening sun the shadows form the 30 or so tombstones stretched across the overgrown grass of the backyard, racing away from the house.

I grew up seeing this house slowly fall into ruin like an old man at a nursing home. Very seldom did I see people at the house. No one tended the garden; no one mowed the lawn. As a child, I was convinced that no one even lived there, that the house was filled with ghosts. There was one time, however, when a blue van parked at the house. I knew something was up and my 12 year-old curiosity was sparked.

Cars did not take the road to McGrueder's place.

No one at the house had a car.

It was a lazy summer day and the van, inching its way up the twisted road, gave pause to the town. I could almost hear idling lawnmowers, the stopping of bicycles, in an effort to catch a glimpse of who would step out of the mysterious van. That was the only time I saw someone visit McGrueder. That was the first time I saw the man with the red briefcase step out of the van. That was the last day of my simple life.



Every year my family packs up a huge basket of food and loads up the wagon with food, treats, and drinks for the annual city picnic. The picnic started out as a place for the women of the city to show off their jams and jellies, fruits and vegetables. I am a fan of Julie Bower's sour-bower-jam. It is so sour that it will make your face contort, but then it goes real sweet. The high school band would play and parents would dance in the basketball courts, waltzing away the night under the flickering yellow sodium lights. At some point, and it never was the same, we'd all pack up and leave. But we would hang

out in the muggy, summer evening, listening to the crickets play their nightly serenades, and the occasional car.

Over the years the picnic has grown to include several rides (I'm looking forward to the Rotor, a ride that spins you around until you are stuck on the wall. Then the floor drops out, leaving you hanging) and a whole section of games at which you can lose you well earned paper route money.

When I was younger, I loved seeing the clowns and the fireworks at night. I am not into that now. It is all a bit too childish for me. We all know that the clowns are just local fathers dressed up for the event. I go to see my friends. We have all agreed to meet at the Ferris wheel at 7 o'clock, just as the sun starts to set.

This year my parents have allowed me to go the picnic on my own. I told them that I would check in with them around dark, but otherwise it will be me and my friends.

My family left hours ago. I decided to hang around the house just because I don't often get the chance to do that. This gave me time to count up my money and get that all organized. I shove the bills in the leather wallet I made at camp last week. The coins I put in the other pocket. Their metallic voices sing as I run down the stairs, out the door, taking two steps at a time, and down the walkway to the street.

Some of my friends want to get out of this town as soon as they are old enough to do so. Not me. I am comfortable here. It is my home. My family has been here since the founding of the town, or as least it seems so. My great-great-great grandpa drove his horse drawn wagon in to town and started up a conversation with a woman who was washing towels at the only water pump. The rest, as they say in the movies, is history.

A cool breeze has picked up. It rustles branches covered in buds and small leaves. It is a 2 mile walk to the park, but I am in no hurry. I savor the sights. The streets are still wet from the street sweeper going through about an hour ago. Most of the shops have closed down early to go to the picnic, but there is still movement at the hardware store, people buying lawn chairs or briquettes.