

A Memory of Smoke

by **Stephen Beckwith**

From the street, my neighborhood was the perfect post-war collection of starter homes. Boxy ranch houses and faux Cap Cods constructed on large lots among the old growth oaks and sassafras. All fifty-six houses were built in the six years between 1948 and 1954.

Horsebrook Creek ran along the back of our property on the west side of the street. Beyond the creek westward was a land of woods, fallow fields, abandoned orchards, meadows, swamps, ponds, railroad tracks and, farther west, the town's airport runways. Beyond the airport the woods and farmland ran unbroken for sixty miles.

This was not Christopher Robin's tame Hundred Acre Wood populated with sweet, befuddled English countryside creatures. In the winter this was the Yukon, in the spring a muddy battlefield in France. In summer we would dam up the creek and go swimming like Huck and Tom. And in the fall, from just after the start of school, until the first snowfall around Thanksgiving, 'across the crick' was a forbidden world of pheasant and deer, and red-hatted hunters.

I first began to explore these wild lands when I was six, and these fields and woods became my principal reality. Family, home, chores, these were all illusionary when compared to time spent atop old fruit trees aiming wormy apples at fat grey squirrels. My buddies and I would dig foxholes deep into the soft black peat bog and we would lob hand-grenade-shaped quinces at each other.

In the summers' the gang would break for dinner at six, gather in the field behind our house at seven, and, once more, wade the Zambezi into darkest Africa until nine.

Horsebrook School sat atop a small promontory on a bend in the creek three houses south of our backyard. The hill was high enough for sledding in the winter. Every classroom window faced west overlooking the creek and the wild lands beyond.

On those first bleak fall days when the weather still felt like late summer we would gaze longingly out the schoolhouse windows at a world of lost pocket knives, hidden treasures buried in tin cracker boxes, and scrap wood fortresses cobbled together with bent nails and weathered grey two-by-fours, built, twenty-five feet up in the canopy of the apple trees. All with the precarious surety of an eight-year-old carpenter's confidence that 'dangerous' was a spurious adult concept.

I would, even in the forbidden fall, wander off on my own over the creek and tramp the autumn fields of golden wild grasses. I would walk the old orchards stomping the rotting apples. I would let my imagination gallop free across that landscape as I watched the hunters work their dogs through the fields from my regular perch in the orchard.

But by the end of September our focus on that world across the creek would largely shift to the street. Westwood Avenue was a pretty typical 1950's Midwest neighborhood street, except that there were no sidewalks and several large oaks sat at the very edge of the asphalt.

Every yard on Westwood had eight to ten old growth oaks scattered around the large yards. With this many trees, constant raking was an unavoidable fall ritual. My father would rake every autumn evening after work and all day Saturday. Our job, my brother, sisters and I, would be to load up an old canvas tarp with piles of the moist leaves and drag them across the lawn to the street.

This frenzied raking and hauling would culminate each night with Westwood Avenue ablaze. The street in spring, summer, even winter was wide enough for two cars to pass, but in the fall the street narrowed to one lane and a contiguous boarder of flames lined both sides of the asphalt. My little brother and I would lie on our backs in the front yard and watch the burning leaves lift on the hot air and float toward the treetops.

To this day I can conjure up in my mind the sweet, acrid smoke of burning oak leaves. It is, more than anything, the odor of my youth. I catch myself thinking of it as the singular smell of an entire decade. In my mind this smoky world is inexorably linked to family, and home, and a place and a time where innocence and friendship had a deeper meaning.

As September gave way to October a crispness in the evening air would arrive abruptly and all legacy of summer would be gone. We knew that once the first weeks of November arrived, the grey skies would descend and not lift again until April, but the October nights were clear, the moon low in the west, and the stars brighter than at any other time of the year.

The leaf smoke would grow thick until Westwood became an odd amalgam of “Father Knows Best” and Dante’s *Inferno*. Each dad manned his fire, rake in hand, while thick grey smoke and flaming leaves rose on the autumn breezes, curling Heavenward.

By mid-October the leaves had been collected and burned each evening in every yard except one. Three quarters of the way down the block, in the only brick house on Westwood Avenue, lived a widow whose husband and son had died in the war. The children of the neighborhood knew her as Aunt Sue. Aunt Sue owned two carefully manicured park-like lots with thirty large oaks, a few maples, and an ancient horse chestnut.

Once or twice a year each child on Westwood would, in turn, spend the night at Aunt Sue’s. It was a long-established tradition by the time my brother and I came along. Aunt Sue did not own a television. You would eat cookies and talk with Aunt Sue in her parlor until eight o’clock. You would go to sleep in her spare bedroom, her son’s old room, and wake to a large country breakfast in the morning.

The weekend before Halloween each year all of the parents, and children old enough to wrangle a rake, would gather to clear Aunt Sue’s property of leaves and dead branches. The resulting pile was as tall as a ten-year-old boy. A torch would be passed down the eighty-foot-long pile of leaves and the conflagration would grow, burning all afternoon and into the evening. Aunt Sue would supply the hot dogs and marshmallows and the neighborhood, parents and children together, would sit on Aunt Sue’s grass, leaning against her stately oaks, eating dinner and laughing until the fires died down and darkness reclaimed the street.

These were the rituals of the season. A time shrouded in swirls of oak leaf smoke, leading up to the climax of fall, All Hallows Eve.

By Halloween the evening smoke had permeated every corner of our small community and hung over the creek bed like spring fog.

Halloween was the culmination of all that childhood should hold for children—the unfettered imagination. The Christmas Season may celebrate children, but it is really an adult holiday. Halloween, however, is not simply about children, it touches the true child in all of us, and we remember. What I remember are the smells of fall, the fire's warmth on a chill evening outside, and God help me it smells like the earth, and family, and love.

As I grew older my solitary fall walks across the creek became more introspective and, slowly, I lost the ability to see the natural world on an equal footing. I had fallen victim to that arrogance of age; I grew up and became the center of my world, as we unfortunately all do eventually.

The orchard was plowed under for a rail switching yard and the fields became an industrial park. A small copse of trees still stands across the creek behind Aunt Sue's old house. There still are no sidewalks on Westwood. Leaf burning has been banned since the mid-Sixties and the houses, built in the early Fifties, have clearly passed their golden age.

I don't go back to Westwood anymore.

A few years ago I was driving around in the country on a late fall evening. I had my window down and you could smell the snow clouds on the horizon. The crisp cold air had grown heavy with the anticipation of a new season. I caught an old familiar scent on the wind. Jack-o-lanterns leapt to mind, and the sweet, sour, stickiness of a caramel apple. I remembered my father standing in the dark street, coffee mug in hand, watching as my brother and I ran from house to house, across familiar lawns, begging for candy.

I turned down a rutted country road and watched a farmer and his son raking leaves into the space between the lawn and the road. The fire danced over the leaf piles in the dusk. I stopped, got out of my car and climbed up on the hood. I sat there leaning against the windshield smelling the burning leaves for more than an hour. It was pitch black outside except for a few coals glowing Halloween orange when I climbed back behind the wheel and headed for home.

I had children of my own and nurtured them as best I could through the prism of my own selfishness. But once a year, when the harvest was done and the late Fall wheat was cut and stacked, when the long sleep of winter loomed heavy over the now smokeless evenings, I would ask my children who or what they wanted to be for Halloween. For a few moments each fall as I waited to hear my children's answer I could smell the oak leaves burning and see the sparks jump on the breeze, rise up in true Halloween spirit and pretend in those few seconds to be stars.

Stephen Beckwith's parents met in a writer's group. The die was certainly cast. He has worked in words most of his life, first as a copywriter, then as a creative director, and finally as a writing instructor. He taught writing at Grand Valley State University and has, for the last twenty years, taught fiction workshops at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. Beckwith has published five nonfiction books on communications, written eight novels, two books of noir-ish short stories, three volumes of poetry, and a historical biography of Louis Campau. He continues to teach workshops and write. There are too many stories to tell and never enough time.