

Sunset Cemetery



Sunset Cemetery is a lovely place. On a clear day from the back part where my mother is buried you can see South Mountain, like a large animal slouching on the horizon.

Once while walking on the Western edge of the cemetery across from where Fluffy the psychiatrist lived before his wife and child left him I saw a raccoon stepping high on its toes to seem taller before disappearing into the brush on the other side of the road.

Another day I heard rumbling thunder when there wasn't a cloud in the sky and walking over the crest of the hill saw a procession of bikers on Harley choppers like noisy ghosts leaning back, arms outstretched on ape hanger handle bars slowly leaving a memorial for one of their companions.

I taught my daughter to drive in the cemetery, going around and around the winding roads in the old stick shift Volvo, stopping and starting on hills to practice slipping the clutch without rolling back too far.

Ennui Pidawee (being a creature outside of time) still lives on Lee Street across from the cemetery and takes his uncle's WWII Japanese rifle to the field beyond the Carnation Dairy and fires at imaginary soldiers crouched behind head stones on the far hill.

Before my mother died in 1955, the cemetery was a place to play. I observed winos, and rode homemade carts around the twisting curves. In the field where Don Gibson would be buried 55 years later (at the time he was practicing his guitar across the two railroad tracks on the upper end of Lee Street) John Burn wrestled a Daisy BB gun from Buddy Wray then shot him in the ass.

For a long time after my mother's death, I only visited the cemetery when I had to, and then never alone.

In the early 60's, prompted by my wife, I went with my sister to pick out a stone for our mother's grave. Until then, the only marker had been the card-sized plaque left by the mortuary which after 10 years was falling apart. My father paid for the stone but did not get involved in picking it out.

Later in the 60's my sister and I and perhaps her husband and my wife discovered the graves of our mother's parents, BK and Molly, and four of their 11 children (of whom four survived into adulthood). I don't recall what prompted us to make this search. I remember that it was cold in the little outbuilding on the edge of the cemetery where we stood around the sexton's map and found the names BK and Molly. Young and full of purpose we walked briskly up the hill to the Parris plot where the graves were marked by various size rocks (contrasting nicely with the marble mausoleums of the neighboring Schenk family). At the time, none of us made the connection between these unremembered graves and my mother's solitary grave, unnoticed for ten years, or the oddity of mother and daughter both dying young and both managing to leave behind people so anxious to move on, who cared so little (or so much).

In 1980, after being acclimated by Karen Thomas to five-mile lunch-time walks I started taking regular hikes through the cemetery. The first time I was afraid and suffered out-of-body experiences when I confused myself with the dead. Later it was all right.

In 1987, after my heart episode, I crossed Lee Street on the back side of the cemetery and ventured past the three houses where I once lived into the unchanging woods that went unbroken to the river and the bluff where my father once played. Sometimes deep within the tangles and thickets I sensed the possibility of another presence, not knowing then that Pidawee still roamed this bit of wilderness.

Now I visit the cemetery every six months, after a trip to my dentist, who is in Shelby, and after I take my taxes to the CPA. Out of habit I follow the arc of the dead from BK and Molly, to Curtis and Isabel, to Frank, and then to Eva and Tom, but I do not think so much about the people I pass. I wonder when and where the circle will close only if my breath going up the back hill becomes particularly labored.

Otherwise, it is just a walk through a pretty place.