

Main Street



There once lived an old man on Main Street. His eyes were black and his nose was long and narrow. His body bent over as he walked and he always walked with a cane. In one hand the cane, the other a black briefcase. He would never pause to look around, nor did he ever stop to say hello when I was playing outside in my front yard. The other kids in the neighborhood all said that he was an Ogre. A legendary monster is usually depicted as a large, hideous, man-like being that eats ordinary human beings, especially infants and children. I worried that one day, I would find myself roasting in his hot oven while he prepared the table for a feast...me.

The grass in front of his house was waist high and the only thing hidden in the tall grass was a green rowboat turned upside down on sawhorses. An old car sat next to the property, but it had not run for years. The tires were flat and the paint faded. It appeared to be a car that may have been used by gangsters in the old movies on TV.



The house was dark brown with two round columns that held the small front porch in place. It appeared to be haunted. A place where no child was safe from his reach. Evil lurked from across the street and I avoided even walking by or riding my bike near the house.

One day when I was about nine years old, I decided that it was time to investigate. My curiosity got the best of me, and I knew that I could run faster if I should be somehow seen. I watched as the old man closed the front door and slowly walked in a southern direction toward downtown. When he was out of sight, I crept over to his

front window and cupped my hands to take a look inside. To my amazement, what I saw...books. Books piled so high that they touched the ceiling. Books on tables, chairs, floor, and even on top of cabinets. Only a small path allowed him to move through his house.

Something caught my eye as I quickly looked southward. He was returning and I had no place to run. He would see me if I crossed the street, so I pushed the tall grass aside and hid under the green rowboat until he passed. The Ogre walked past me but never looked my way. My heart was pounding inside my chest as he unlocked the front door and went inside. It started to rain and I could smell a distinctive odor when rain strikes warm pavement. It is a smell that I will never forget. A Short time later, which seemed like an eternity, the side door to his kitchen, which I could see slowly opened, and out he stepped with a bag in his hands. He reached inside and pulled out the seed... birdseed. He broadcasted the seed on the ground and called to the birds now circling his porch. "Come and get your dinner Grace, Robin, Henrietta, Bert, Winston. Here you go, Monroe." Once he finished feeding the birds, he reentered that side door, and out the front he went. After he was completely out of sight, I quickly ran back to the safety of my house and inside the front door.

Years passed and as I grew into a teenager. I must have been around twelve years old. I started to help around the house by mowing the yard for my dad, washing the car and helping wherever I could. I could see as I pushed the mower back and forth across the front lawn of my house that the grass in front of the Ogre's house was taller than ever before. I thought to myself, the Ogre doesn't have anyone to help. He has no friends, no family. No-one would ever visit, no-one except for his birds. I also

remembered how he softly spoke to Grace and the other birds outside of his kitchen on the porch. Monroe was a larger robin. A bit older with distinctive feathers. It was as if the bird had survived many battles in life and survived. How could someone be that mean and evil and yet care for his flying friends with such passion? Were the stories about him really true?



I went into the garage where my dad kept a sickle, you know, like the Reaper of Death carries. I sharpened it and across the street I ventured. I waited until I was sure he had departed and started to cut the grass. I made large strokes and cut the grass. Once I had the grass short enough, I raked it and piled it neatly in the back alley to be removed. Then I mowed the lawn with my dad's mover and edged the sidewalk leading to his house. I worked most of the day and was exhausted. I watched in the late afternoon to see if the Ogre would reappear and how he would react. He paused for a moment in front of his house. He walked up the sidewalk and into the house, but this time, it didn't look so haunted, so dark. Days passed and months poured into years. I continued to mow his yard and never once did he speak to me or offer any money for that matter. The truth be told, I never expected payment. I did see him occasionally pass while I rode my bike downtown and I would wave at him. But he would never look in my direction or say a word.

I loved playing baseball and was selected to play for a major league team, the Vancouver Doors. I played second base and was a pitcher. As I prepared to pitch and go through my routine, I would notice him sitting in the stands. He would be sitting

alone at the top of the grandstand away from everyone else. Never did I see him talk to anyone or even cheer if a great play was made. He would sit quietly reading a book with an occasional glance when I came to bat. After the game ended, I would quickly run to the stands to see if I could at least talk to him. He was always gone.

It was in the fifth grade that I started playing the trumpet. Previously, my parents thought it would be a good idea if I started to play the accordion. The Lawrence Welk show came on every Sunday evening with dancing, singing, and Welk playing the accordion. Accordion was very popular in those days. I played in the town accordion band from third grade to fifth grade. The day I returned the accordion for a shiny trumpet was a joyous day. Not that I didn't like playing the accordion, the accordion was just not cool. When I entered Junior High, the music teacher, Bert Soderstrom called my parents to tell them that I was showing aptitude and asked if I would be willing to play a solo at the upcoming concert. He also said that he would like to teach me privately. My parents told him that lessons were beyond what we could afford. Mr. Soderstrom said he would teach me without charge. His only request was that I not miss a private lesson and that I would practice a half hour daily. My parents made a deal that If I practiced, I wouldn't have to do dishes after dinner with my sister Pam. At this point in my life, my sister was my nemesis, a dreaded enemy. We fought like cats and dogs. My dad took my place each night that I practiced. That is what good dads do for their children.

As we were warming up in preparation for the concert, I looked up at the audience and there he was. Black suit, white shirt, and a black tie. A top hat and a walking cane. Again, as before, he would disappear not to be found anywhere.

It was in my freshman year in high school that my mom brought a copy of the local newspaper and placed it on the kitchen table. She said, “isn’t that the man that you have been cutting his lawn that lives across the street”?



The newspaper article said: “Monroe Stephens, born July 3, 1878, died May 1, 1966. Mr. Stephens, a long-time resident of Montesano, passed away last week at the age of 88. He spent many years as the prosecuting attorney for Grays Harbor County. Mr. Stephens had no known relatives.” My heart stopped for a moment. The picture appeared to be the same man that I had known as the Ogre who lived

across the street. The same man that would snare children and cook them alive for supper. The same man that watched me grow into adolescence and never said a word to me.

I decided that I should attend his service. It was a graveside service at the Wynooche Cemetery. I got my Schwinn bike from the garage and rode to the cemetery about three miles from my house. It was a warm spring day and the sun was shining. I showed up to find three people in attendance. Greg Nelson, the father of a good friend and attorney in town, a person waiting to bury his ashes that worked for the cemetery, and a man who spoke a few words. I assumed that he was an acquaintance from his work as an attorney. The ceremony was short and ended swiftly. As I stood next to the ground where he was to eternally rest, I noticed that a large number of birds had gathered. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I noticed a lone robin with battle scars and coloring similar to Monroe. Monroe was singing a sweet melody for a lost friend. The other birds resting on tree branches nearby joined in the tribute to a man who had been

a friend so many years ago. Why couldn't I see the beauty in what they saw? Why did I let fear and allow rumors to keep me from knowing a person who could have been my friend, but didn't realize it until it was too late?



Three years have gone by. I was preparing for graduation from high school in early June. I had my whole life in front of me with plans to attend college and become a music teacher like Mr. Soderstrom. When I walked into the dining room, my mom said

she had discovered a gift on the front porch with my name on the package. It was wrapped in brown paper with a note attached. It read:

Dear Timmy:

Thank you for taking care of my yard.

Your friend,

Monroe

Inside the package, I found a book of poems that I still cherish today. I figured that Greg Nelson completed his duty as executor of the ogre's estate. Inside the front cover of the book, I found a poem attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson that has given me strength and guidance as I have walked down this path of life.

To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one's self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden

patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—this is to have succeeded.

If I have been successful in life, then I can look back and remember my early years with gratitude for a man that I never really got to know but came to realize the impact that he made on my life. If even one life has breathed easier because I have lived, I owe that to Monroe Stephens, my friend.