

## **Small-Town Terror**

**by Carolyn Gamble**

*Student Essay*

Situated between majestic mountains and rolling hills, Benton is much like any other small eastern Tennessee settlement. It was election day, and looking forward to a visit to the ice cream shop, I accompanied my grandfather as he drove the ten-mile journey to town. Country life offered little excitement, but that day an air of uneasiness replaced the usual contentment one felt while passing aged buildings, their drabness contrasted sharply by a few colorful, modern improvements. Having spent the first ten years of my life here, it was easy to detect any change in the town's mood.

I pondered the worried expression on the faces of the few people we saw on the streets. It seemed everyone was in a hurry. There were not the usual groups gathered to exchange local gossip. Most noticeable was the absence of children.

As my grandfather's dilapidated Ford approached the town's only traffic light, we were greeted--not by flashing red, yellow or green--but by uniformed National Guardsmen armed with guns and appearing much out of place in such placid surroundings. As our vehicle slowed to a stop, I was aghast as I saw before me a huge machine gun, pointed in our direction. A young guardsman walked briskly to the car and explained, almost apologetically, "Sorry Sir, but we'll have to search your car. Just routine procedure."

As the car was being searched, we learned the reason for such drastic precautionary measures. A man whom we knew and who was a candidate for the sheriff's office, had been brutally murdered in the presence of his wife and daughter. It was rumored that the opposing party was responsible for the fatal shotgun blast, and other rumors stated that explosives would be brought into town to bomb the courthouse.

As this unbelievable information was being given, I sat petrified, trying to convince myself that this was the same town where, only yesterday, old men in dirty overalls lounged around the courthouse, spitting tobacco and discussing the forthcoming election. Dogs and children had romped freely on the sidewalks, while women browsed in the stores for hours without buying anything. Strangely, all this had changed overnight, and the preconceptions I had about our peaceful country and the glorious right to vote were beginning to sound as a sour note. Marching through the streets, guards with guns gave the appearance of towns I had seen in the movies. Towns which did not know freedom, but captivity.

"He'll probably go home," I mused to myself as my grandfather began changing the gears to move on. Surely no one could be so stupid as to go into that courthouse now! Thinking how wonderful it would be to get back to the safety of our farmhouse, I was somewhat taken aback when Grandpa

parked near the entrance of the threatened building. The lines in his face seemed to be carved with determination, and with unfaltering stride he quickly mounted the steps to the building. A man had died at the hands of those who tried to control a county's right to vote. That "right" was now even more precious. Grandpa would vote.