

Aforementioned

by Craig Lancaster

Cooper and I didn't leave his house until dusk. It was an easy decision to stay buttoned up that long. Inside: Atari and IntelliVision, as much ice cream as we wanted and no chores, on account of Cooper's parents were loaded and had a maid. Outside: Texas in full-throated July, ready to pour humidity over us like so much syrup. We'd have stayed in all day and night had Cooper's mom not finally tired of us ping-ponging from room to room, agitating, our fast-twitch teenage muscles wanting to move even if our brains didn't. She came to us, gin and tonic in hand, and told us to get out.

I flung the basketball at the hoop and Cooper shagged the ball. He was the luckiest bastard I knew. A rubberized half court was rigged up in his backyard, with a fiberglass backboard and breakaway rim and netting all the way around to keep errant balls from escaping. I coveted that whole setup. The previous summer, before Cooper and I became friends, my old man had mixed cement in a rusty wheelbarrow and posted a particle-board hoop he'd found at a flea market. It stood twelve feet tall astride our driveway, which was at a slight downhill angle, and while I appreciated the old man's effort, once I met Cooper, I never used it again. A few years later, the old man took it down and jackhammered out the concrete. We never talked about that, and now, seventeen years after I saw him into the ground, I startle myself sometimes when I think that if I could speak to him just one more time, I'd tell him I wished I'd played ball with that hoop more than I did. I don't know. It just didn't seem like a big deal at the time.

I was working around the world — hitting shots on the periphery of the court — when Cooper made an audacious observation.

“We need to get us girlfriends this year.”

I let fly with another shot that rattled through the hoop. “Good idea. How we gonna do that?”

Cooper gathered in the ball and whipped a chest pass to me at the top of the key. “I don't know.”

I stopped shooting and slipped the ball under my arm. "Got your eye on anybody?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Who?"

"You know that girl Marci who lives up on Donerail?"

A hazy picture of a short, milky-skinned blonde popped up in my head. "She younger than us?"

"Yeah, she'll be a seventh-grader."

"I think I know her. Marci Barnes, right? You like her?"

Cooper held up a hand, calling for the ball. I gave it to him and we switched places.

His first shot caromed off the side of the rim. I chased down the ball.

"There are a few nice girls in that neighborhood," I said. "Anne Irving, she lives around the corner on Montrose. And then there's Brianna. She lives on Manuel."

"Brianna," Cooper said reverently. Never in a million years could either of us hope to get Brianna Odell as a girlfriend.

Cooper was finding the range now, and I promptly retrieved three shots in a row that passed through the net unmolested by the steel hoop.

"Nice shooting."

Cooper caught the ball in stride and dispatched another perfect shot. "Thanks. What about the aforementioned Anne? Do you like her?"

I corralled the ball and held it. "Aforementioned?"

"Yeah."

"How does a word like that even come up?"

"What's the big deal? You mentioned her before. Aforementioned."

"Yeah, but ..."

"But what?"

I threw a baseball pass at him, hard. "I'm just saying, it's a pretty weird word to just say. You do that all the time. Have you ever noticed that?"

Cooper put up another shot that found the bottom of the net.

"Noticed what?"

"Come on, man," I said, throwing the ball back to him. "You're always using big words in class and stuff."

Another made shot. I threw back the ball.

"Like what?"

I didn't much care for this who-me act. "OK, here's one," I said. "Defrenes ... defenestrated."

Cooper laughed. "Defenestrated."

"Whatever. I looked it up. Why can't you just say 'thrown out a window'?"

He shot again, another make.

"Why does it bug you?"

I tossed the ball back to him. "It doesn't bug me. It just seems ..."

He pitched the ball at the hoop again. It swished through.

"Ostentatious?" he said.

"Yeah. Goddamn it." I grabbed the ball.

"Well, Ben, I'm sorry to be so polysyllabic."

"Whatever, man. I don't care that you made that last shot. It's my turn. Get out of there."

* * *

I hadn't thought of that night in years. Today, I was headed to my mom's house — my house, long ago -- after Cooper's funeral, and I had to turn right on Donerail and then left on Montrose before crossing Manuel into our subdivision. It all came flooding back.

Cooper never did tell Marci that he liked her, I don't think. By the time a new school year rolled around, there were other girls — always, always other girls. A few years after that, Anne Irving and I went to senior prom together, but she ditched me for John Courtney and I ended up drinking hooch in the parking lot with the guys from auto shop. The next morning, I woke up in an alley off Rosedale, my shoes, wallet and cummerbund gone, and I had to call the old man collect to come fetch me. We never talked about that, either.

We stayed friends, Cooper and I. We were as close as we could manage, what with my living in Fresno and his staying in Texas. Our

kids are close, like cousins, and we'd occasionally take vacations together -- usually somewhere he and I could play golf while Deborah and Natalie did whatever the hell it was that they did. After I lost Deborah to cervical cancer six years ago, Cooper came and stayed with me for a couple of weeks when my grief was still inchoate (his word). He pulled me through that awful shit. I never imagined that I would lose him, too.

A lot of people came to say goodbye to Cooper, a lot of people I didn't remember and hadn't seen in nearly twenty-five years. Think about that. A quarter-century goes by so fast. It wipes away your youth, your looks (if you had any to begin with) and a good deal of your memories, but maybe not the most important ones.

Brianna Odell was there. She told me she'd moved back to that house on Manuel after her parents passed on. Her kids are in college now, her husband down in Itasca with some hot piece of ass he met at a chili cook-off. The whole thing sounds like the worst cliché ever, which is why I'm going over to Brianna's place tonight with a bottle of wine. Maybe that's a dumb thing to do, but I'm doing it just the same. I've about had my fill of these aforementioned regrets.

