Ardmore Summer - Gerry Scott-Moore (11/18/24)

In late May, life comes to a sweltering halt in the heat of Ardmore, Oklahoma. It's not heat alone, nor the damp that clings to you, growing through the day. It's also the amalgam of smells: The slow baking of grass, scrub, and trees creates a rich and fecund odor of barbecued greenery. There is the tinny smell of fine red clay dust. At midday, the asphalt used to patch the streets turns melty and gives the air a tart petroleum tinge. Inside, anywhere in the 1960s, is the ever-present cigarette smoke and the stink it leaves behind. In the morning, the air is scented with Ivory soap and talcum powder, and it sometimes returns in the dusky evening. In between, there are also body smells, but not the harsh bite of working men in the sun—instead, the delicate smells of women and children lingering in the house. Fanning themselves, they avoid any movement that generates an additional digit of heat.

All of this is framed in my mind by a humble 3-bedroom clapboard home with a single mimosa tree in the front yard, a front porch absent chairs or swings, unpopulated brick-bordered flower beds along the driveway, and a fenced backyard with a lone tree. It's an oak with two weathered wooden slats haphazardly nailed to its side to aid in a scramble up to the first major limbs. High in the canopy, one bench-like board is crudely nailed to a natural cleft between two limbs as they spread out over the edge of the house's roof.

In this weather, I look down at scattered tufts of grass under a leaning basketball hoop, but little more. The greenery up here is too dense to see either of the neighbors' houses or the empty backlot behind. Out of the sun's sullen stare, it smells foresty in here, the air cooler and moist. I lean back against the trunk, pull my feet up on the bench, and dream. A summertime dream of private swimming pools, motorboats, and idling around town in an air-conditioned Cadillac, three things I've never seen or done.

Below, from inside the house, I hear the sound of the Beach Boys filtering through the screen windows. My mind drifts to a beach, ocean waves, surfboards, bikinis, suntan lotion. I have been to California only in my backyard dreams.

Inside, my sister changes the record to the Broadway soundtrack of Camelot. My semi-conscious vision shifts to heavy brocade, ruffles, crowns, and ornate sword handles in leather scabbards. Weight. My drowsiness is interrupted by the tuneless baritone of Richard Burton and the jittery vibrato of Richard Harris. I can stand no more. Roused, I summon my strength and concentration to navigate backward down the tree to the ground.

There lies a basketball. I pick it up reflexively. It is a little deflated, but I toss it at the cock-eyed hoop anyway. It bumps the rim and drops in the loose dirt like a corpse. After a slight pause, it rolls over on its flat side with a sigh.

Six weeks of unfocused lounging also deflates the manic thrill of leaving the high school in late May with the mirage of endless summer fun. There is precious little: A drive-in movie, an indulgent mom drives us to the lake for the day, an air-conditioned afternoon matinee to make fun of until an usher tells us to shut our yaps. One weekend night, a thug with slicked-back hair gives us a beer in a parking lot. Seeds of hope at the local sock hops at the YMCA or Elk's Club Annex; a couple of girls with makeup, all eyes, and butterfly hands.

I walk the four blocks to the Dairy Queen for a foot-long coney or a Frito chili pie. In the front window sits a chair-sized replica of a chocolate-dipped cone, one of mankind's greatest inventions. The uniformed lady inside upends a cone full of whipped faux ice cream into a vat of chocolate syrup, and it instantly freezes into a thin, skin-tight coating.

Sitting on top of the sun-stripped picnic tables, the foot-long is like my fleeting summer vacation: While I hold it in my hands, it seems gigantic, but I've hardly eaten any, and it's almost over. When I take the last bite, it feels like it never was. I can still taste it, warm and savory, but now it's more abstract than before I began. Soon, I'll slouch into class with a new 3-ring

binder and begin dreaming of next summer like this summer never happened.

Haircuts never entered my mind until I was 13. I was surprised to notice my hair in the mirror one morning, and it was geeky. The Ivy League style haircut had imposed its vanity or virtues into my thinking. Similarly, I never thought about my pants and shirt, or socks and shoes before then. When I dressed in the morning, knocked dirt off my shoes, or tore a shirt sleeve cuff jumping over a chain-link fence--I never thought of clothes as a statement of physical decoration, personal definition, nor imagined that others judged me.

Mom tells me to get a haircut. It's no longer somewhere she escorted me with my little brother. She gives me three bucks and tells me to do it today. It's become another errand instead of a compulsory outing. Fundamental things change every day.

David Christie, who lives a block over, told me there's a good barber south of Main with this guy who can cut your hair like a surfer or like Steve McQueen. Eric and I walk over to find the place. We walk in as a businessman in a suit and tie walks out.

There are two barber chairs, a big mirror behind each. On the other side of the room are four spindly plastic chairs, a small TV turned off, and a fan buzzing back and forth. It smells equally of hair tonic and cleaning supplies.

There's one barber, a white-haired guy, sweeping hair up from beneath a chair. This must be the guy Christie says won't skin you. Crewcuts and burrs are now uncool. Eric picks up a copy of Argosy magazine from a pile on the coffee table and picks a chair. The barber leans his broom on the side of a big sink.

"Step up, young man. Y'all both gettin' a haircut?" He talks too loud.

"No, sir. Just me."

"Two-fifty," he barks, eyeing me steadily. At some point in the past year, adults started to see me as a juvenile delinquent until proven otherwise.

"Okay, sure." I dutifully pull three bucks out of my pocket.

"You can pay me later, but it still costs two-fifty." I hand him the bills. He counts them, fishes two quarters out of his pocket, and gives them to me.

"Unless you want a shave. You want a shave?" I settle in the chair, and he throws a frayed white drape over me and pulls tight the snap collar.

"No, sir."

"Ha!" he barks out loudly. A rough hand rubs my chin and cheek. "Not ready for shaving yet, young fella! Okay then, how you want her done?" he asks, rubbing my head and pushing my hair around.

"I only want it trimmed around the ears, but leave it longer on the top."

"Hah? What's that you say?"

"Just trim it around the ears, and--"

"Speak up, boy. Don't mumble."

I look up at him and see a hearing aid strapped to one ear. I raise my voice, "I want it trimmed around the ears. Not too much off the top."

"Okay, okay then," he says, stepping back. "You don't have to yell, son. I'm not deaf!"

Oh, he's deaf, alright.

"So you want it done modern-style, like these fellas," he jerks a thumb at pictures on the wall of hairstyles taken from magazines. All are tinted blue from sunlight. There are Elvis-type pompadours stacked high, a Marine haircut, pictures of Kennedy, and a sweatered college boy with a tidy fringe. No surfers. The old man considers his task while he works the scissors in his hand, click, click, click.

"Don't you worry none, I'm gonna cut it real good, and it won't take a minute. I don't charge by the hour. No, sir." The old man begins snipping away with a fury, filling my lap with locks.

Occasionally, he looks at my buddy, whose tufted red hair sticks out everywhere. Ereic doesn't care, and his mom and dad don't bug him. They both work every day except Sunday, when they sleep all day and Eric has to be quiet.

"You need a cut too, don't you, young man?" he shouts at Eric. "I do you both--you only pay two bucks. That's two bucks from each of you."

Eric doesn't look at him as he answers, treating him like any classroom teacher. "I guess not."

"Hah?"

Eric turns to him and annunciates every syllable, moving his lips in sarcastic exaggeration, "No, thank you, sir. I'm saving to buy a new car." He bats his eyes to feign guilelessness.

"That car's gonna cost you a lot of haircuts." He swivels me to a new angle and chuckles. "I said a car's gonna cost him a lot of haircuts," he yells at me. I offer a grimace of acknowledgment while he lifts my chin and pulls my ear.

After several minutes of listening to the fan buzz, he nods in conclusion. "Yup." He has provided $2.50 worth of grooming. His mouth set in concentration, he picks up the electric trimmer. As it whines, he circles my head, jabs at my sideburns, and applies unnecessary force, sawing away at the nape of my neck.

"That'll about do you!" he says. He whisks my neck, unbuttons the collar, and carefully empties the hair from the smock a short distance from the chair. I start to rise, but he pushes me back at the shoulder.

"Don't run off now, I gotta finish you."

He brushes a cloud of talcum powder on my neck, scrubs bay rum in my hair, and combs it in three smart strokes. My neck burns.

"The girls are going to be chasing you around the schoolyard now! Oh yes, they'll be all over you." He delights in his own patter.

"Alright. Thanks." As I stand, I see myself in the mirror. I've been scalped. I look like a fourth-grader with whitewalls. There's a thin mound of shiny hair on top and a tiny flip at the front. It's Howdy Doody time. It's pathetic.

Eric is already standing outside on the sidewalk as I leave. "Oh man, you look like a fruit," he tells me.

"That old guy sucks! Jesus, what was David talking about? That old fart was the worst ever!" It's another daily teenage injustice. I don't know whether to cry or punch something.

"Your hair smells like shoe polish," Eric snorts.

"Hey, why don't you shut up?"

"Don't worry, it'll grow back--by this time next year!" Eric delights in razzing me. It lasts another two blocks before he loses interest. I still have fifty cents in my pocket. We can kill some time getting rid of that. Pinball maybe, or a candy bar.

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