

Down By The Berry Patch

"Cooners"

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It happened every year. Watermelons would be smashed under the streetlights for the whole town to see. People would speculate about where they came from and who did it and Daddy pulled out his lecture about how cooning wasn't innocent fun, but out and out stealing.

Who did it wasn't really that big a secret. Cooners weren't particularly hungry for melon but they did have a big appetite for an audience to listen to their story about how they almost got caught. It took a brave person to be out there in the dark knowing that they'd almost get caught. They slithered on their bellies, hid in shadows, got chased, and sometimes were left behind.

Getting left behind was my favorite story. How terrifying it must be to see everyone else take off and leave you behind. One thing you could count on was that your buddies would circle back and rescue you and when they told the story they'd get tears in their eyes from laughing so hard telling about how scared you were and how brave they were.

Reports began surfacing about where the big melons were. Plans were being made and I would contemplate what it would be like to go out cooning some night. There would be at least one dinner table conversation revolving around offering what seemed like convincing arguments in favor of cooning that might shake Daddy's strong anti-cooning position.

"Ya, but people who grow melons expect kids'll sneak in and get them. They don't take all of 'um. It's just for fun to see if you can do it without getting caught."

"You can't really think it's right to take them. People work hard all summer long to get them to grow because they need them for food or to sell them because they need the money. How would you feel if you worked so hard all summer and then went out one morning and discovered they were gone?"

Maybe real cooners didn't ask their parents for permission to go. Mine would never give in so I always had to say, "My parents won't let me." My brother figured it out. Andy just didn't ask.

I knew that some people really felt protective about their fruit. Once when Loretta and I were riding our bikes we dropped them in the middle of the sidewalk and went into a lady's yard to get an apple off the



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Photo Caption: John (left) and Alex (right) Liberacki as children; before they lived next door to each other and shared a melon patch.

ground. She came running out and called us thieves. She yelled that we should get out of there. Those were her apples.

Another time when I going to stay overnight with Edith we went to her outhouse after dark. On the way back to the house we slipped into Mrs. Schmidt's grape arbor and lay flat on our backs between the rows so we couldn't be seen while we helped ourselves. It was great to spit the slimy insides as far as they would go and then squeeze the juice into my mouth. I ended up going home with a stomachache. It wasn't so much from eating too many grapes as it was from feeling guilty for stealing. I just told Mother I came home because I didn't feel good.

I thought a lot about Lapak's melons. Loretta and I kept checking them. I carried a jack knife around in my pocket because there were lots of ripe things in our gardens and you never knew when you'd get hungry and need a knife to cut off a carrot top or skin a kohlrabi. The knife was perfect for cutting a plug in the top of the watermelon to see if it was ripe yet. Some of them had a lot of perfect triangles fitted back into them. We'd bite that pinkish tid bit off the rhine and declare it, "Still green," before we shoved the plug back in place. It would be terrible if someone cooned their melons and we never got to eat a ripe one.

One summer Daddy and Uncle John decided to grow watermelons just to win the game. When the peak of the season came they spent a whole day rigging up a line around the watermelon patch. Their theory was when cooners tried to sneak into the melon patch they'd trip the wire and floodlights they had mounted on the garage would expose them to the whole town. The first night after it was installed their system passed the test. Daddy and Uncle John were hiding in the garage. Sometime after midnight a raccoon was put in the spotlight.

Word got around town that Al set a bear trap out in his watermelons. It was really embarrassing when kids talked right in front of me about what a terrible person Al Liberacki was to do something like that because someone could get hurt really bad.

I knew it wasn't true but I sure wasn't going to tell them. Why was it so bad? Who was worse? My Dad for setting a bear trap to protect his own property or being a thief?

What was really the worst were the people who said mean things about my Daddy!

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