

Kathleen McGwin

### My Last Gasp of Summer

The Sandhill Cranes are gathering together in the mowed hay fields looking like the people who mill around in the senior center parking lot waiting to board their bus for the latest leisure escape. The red-winged blackbirds cling to the tips of the brown cat tails, the groups a little larger each day I drive past. Goldenrod has peaked and the rich yellow is browning bit by bit. Monarch butterflies flutter among roadside wildflowers drinking sweet nectar for their seemingly impossible trip to Central America. Soon I'll remember to pick up more sweet corn for supper because I'd like it one more time this season.

This season. This season that in Wisconsin is always too short. Summer. It has the same number of days as the other three seasons, but it only shows its colors for a fleeting, flying moment; a moment that I want to hold onto and keep in my dresser drawer so that when the only colors outside are white, brown, gray and black, I can open the drawer and see red, pink, blue and yellow and smell alyssum, hyacinth and lilac and feel sun on my skin and warm rain on my face.

Because summer is so fleeting, I'm making a conscious effort this year to extend the season and live summer until its end on September 21. I've figured out many ways to enjoy the entire length of summer. I'm going to fight that commercial, mass market mentality that makes us start thinking of Halloween before Labor Day and Christmas before Halloween. Summer is going to be my mode of operation until fall is officially here.

For one thing, I'm not going to "fall" for the clothing hook hung out there for us. When the stores start dressing their dummies in plum-colored, bulky sweaters and mustard colored wide-wale corduroy pants, I start craving the feel of wool against my skin. Trouble is, this happens in August, and that's only the middle of summer. I will not give in to it this year. No wool will cover my body until the end of September. Cotton tee shirts, pastel gauze shirts, sandals and cropped pants will be my dress for the entire summer season. I don't care if I have to layer it. I don't care if I have to wear socks with my sandals. I'll

remind myself of those days not so long ago that I wanted desperately to wear linen and discard the bulk of my winter coat. I'll remind myself that I'll savor the smell of my wool and the feel of my turtle necks even more when I finally pull them on in the real fall, not the one made by Madison Avenue.

Then there are the foods of the season. I will not bite into a crisp, juicy, fresh apple until October. Apples are fall. I'm buying melons till they're gone. Watermelons, musk melons, every melon that will cling to the vine till the leaves turn. And squash? No butternut squash will be baked in my house until after the last day of summer. I will bake a key lime pie on September 20. My plate will be garnished with leaf lettuce and strawberries, even if the strawberries have to be thawed first. All my bratwurst will be cooked over charcoal in the back yard where the sail boat wind sock floats and the umbrella on the picnic table is opened wide. Any hamburger will be in patties with grill lines on them, not crumbled in casseroles thick with beans and tomato. My drink will be lemonade, not apple cider. Summer lasts almost until the end of September and my menus will be summer ones till then.

My plan includes the more subtle aspects of the season also, like smells. Remember when you longed for the smells of summer last March? Oh, to breathe in the odor of wet earth or sniff honey suckle. Even bug spray would have been a welcomed smell. So now, no matter how the dusty, musty smell of the first firing of the furnace brings to mind the warmth of home and hearth and the desire to wrap up in an afghan, I'm going to fight it. Not one cinnamon scented candle will be burned until the month starts with O. I'm going out today to buy hyacinth, herbal, and floral votives. I will not switch to my spicy, musky, heavier perfumes either. I'm sticking with lilac and sea breeze until the breezes are really autumn winds, not the last-days-of summer gusts. Pine and evergreen are for Christmas. Nutmeg and ginger are for fall. Summer is here till the equinox and so is my peony and iris potpourri.

And my house will retain a summer look until the season's final days. I refuse to look at a pumpkin and long to take it home and put it on the doorstep with Indian corn and gourds. My doorstep will remain adorned with morning glories and geraniums and as much as I long to lean a bundle of corn stalks next to the door, instead, I'll fluff up the silk sweet peas that I wound around the wind chime only two months ago.

There are some things that I can't stop. In Wisconsin, Green Bay Packer fever never really leaves with the summer sun and it will grow with a vengeance with pre-season games. School will start. Camouflage hunting clothes will be hung on clotheslines to air out and I'll know that the blaze orange is itching to follow. Bird feeders will replace hanging plants on wrought iron shepherd's hooks. And those in our society who are the worker ants will hang Christmas lights while their fingers won't be cramped from cold. The only blue in the bird world will eventually be the blue jay and the only red will be the cardinal and the finch in my back yard. Summer houses will be shut up and travel ads will toast locations closer to the equator instead of northern lakes and national parks. But until that last day of summer, I promise myself I am going to live in the present, not projecting into the pile of leaves that will crunch under my feet or into the heady scent of those leaves burning, smoldering, raising their smoke into the blue autumn sky.

I will not long for chili after walking the dog. I will not want a fire to keep me warm as I look out over the branches of the trees so recently covered in a green cloak. I will not wear the carved oak leaf and acorn pin on my lapel. I will not suddenly look at my friend and gush, "I love fall, don't you?" I will not be fickle and abandon summer before its time because I know that all too soon I will not be able to rid myself of winter. Summer lasts till September 21. So will my lazy, hazy days of this beautiful season.