



Fall came early this year. By the time you read this, it may have retreated again – who knows around here? – but the fact remains that we enjoyed a cool, autumnal blast the weekend of September 16th, and I, for one, was caught completely off guard. Didn't have my sweaters out yet. Didn't have any fall shoes (i.e. non flip-flops) for my daughter. Hadn't even started my annual curse-summer/pine-for-fall grumbling yet. And suddenly, here it was. Crisp and refreshing and totally unexpected. I suppose this premature cool streak might have been a sign of global warming – they say most things are these days – but I just saw it as a gift.

And this is the time of year when gifts abound, don't you think? Or maybe they just stand out in greater relief against fall's delicious poignancy. For me, fall is the wistful season – the season of what-was and what-might-have-been – when everything just feels so darn meaningful. T.S. Eliot called April the cruellest month, "mixing memory and desire," but I savor that bittersweet cocktail more keenly in October and November. Fall's not cruel, exactly; more like pleasantly painful. Like a lingering lump in your throat, or a longing. It's a season for smiling through tears.

I've been doing a lot that, lately... smiling through tears, I mean. Our family suffered some close calls this summer, and some very real losses, and life seems particularly precious in its frailty. When the world feels precarious, little things – like an early fall, for instance – mean a lot.

One little thing that meant a lot happened last weekend, when my daughter and I participated in Beaufort's Tricentennial Parade. A friend invited us to play in the Marching Kazoo Band, and while that wasn't exactly on my bucket list, Amelia loved the idea, so I thought... why not? One of the great gifts of parenthood, I believe, is being forced to make a fool of yourself... and learning to enjoy it. Of course, eventually your kids hit an age when the silly things they once begged you to do suddenly embarrass them deeply. We're not quite there yet. Not quite. So we headed down to Adventure Street on that chilly surprise of a morning, donned our free "I Heart Kazoos" tee-shirts (thanks, Stephen Murray, of Kazoobie Kazoos!) took up our humble instruments and hit the street. Our motley ensemble of marching minstrels alternated songs – "Oh, When the Saints" with "You're a Grand Old Flag" – and we were harmonizing and riffing *and it was so much fun*

. Apparently, human beings are genetically incapable of keeping a straight face when confronted with a marching kazoo band. It's simply not possible. Parade watchers were smiling and laughing and clapping wildly. For one magic hour on a blustery fall morning, I had the privilege of bringing pure, unadulterated joy to the citizens of my town, with my beloved child – who will be mortified by this memory soon enough – right there by my side. That's the good stuff, people.

And you know what else is good? The kindness of the doctors and nurses in the ER at Beaufort Memorial Hospital. Without going into great detail – because I might faint at my keyboard if I did – I will simply say that I had a little health scare last week. Actually, I rarely use "health scare" and "little" in the same sentence. I am probably the most squeamish, irrational, terrified-of-all-things-medical person you'll ever meet. The mere smell of a hospital turns me into a quivering mass of panic pudding. (I'm not kidding; I have a phobia.) But the professionals at BMH were so warm and caring – joking with me, bringing me extra blankets and pillows, assuring me I'd be okay – that eventually, after a couple of hours (heh), I gained control of my violent shaking and found my way to my "happy place." (Okay, it wasn't really happy, but at least my teeth weren't chattering there.) By the time the tests came back, I had chosen the hymns for my funeral, composed an extensive carpool schedule for Jeff, and considered several potential new mommies for Amelia. Thankfully, this morbid exercise proved unnecessary. I was fine, health-wise – aside from my mental health, that is – and I'd faced my fears, head on. Next time I enter a hospital, whether for myself or someone else, I am almost certain I won't feel like vomiting. Almost.

Last week also brought the Emmy Awards, which I watched Sunday night with my daughter. (Within the first five minutes, I regretted having said she could watch. Remember when awards shows were great family viewing?) Anyway, in the midst of all that crass humor, off-color innuendo and self-satisfied preening, something beautiful happened. Kyle Chandler defied the odds – and all the critics' predictions – and won the Best Actor award for his work on "Friday Night Lights." I've already written about that marvelous show – more than once, I think – so I won't bore you with another rave, especially since it's been canceled. (In five years, it never really found its ratings niche, though its fans are religious in their devotion.) Chandler, clearly stunned, went to the podium without an acceptance speech, but with all the quiet dignity and authenticity his show brought to the screen for five seasons. FNL's creator Jason Katims had already surprised the crowd – and delighted me – by winning for Best Writing. But seeing "Coach Taylor" up there, with his slight drawl and humble good manners – being honored by Hollywood for a show that embodies everything Hollywood is not – well, it just about did me in. Again, I was smiling through tears.

Speaking of which, did you hear that REM has called it quits after three decades? The news was posted on Facebook this week, and everybody was talking about it. Everybody in my generation, that is. If you came of age in the 80s, chances are this was *your* band... the one that changed all your ideas about music and what it could be. From a sea of generic, soul-deadening pop, hokey, mind-numbing hair-band pap, and the long-overdue death-groans of disco, REM rose like Athena from the head of Zeus, mysterious and poetic and beautifully brainy. One friend said, "They were

my

Beatles," and I don't think that's going too far. Others haven't been quite as kind, saying the band should have walked away long ago. As for me, I'm just grateful they showed up when they did, taking rock music to a deeper, more thoughtful and spiritual place... and taking a spoiled, superficial generation there with it.

I see I'm running out of space and have failed to make any real connections between the random topics on which I've been musing. (I really thought I could!) Please have mercy on this column and see it for what it is: the heartfelt if incoherent ramblings of someone who's mourning the break-up of her favorite band, lamenting the end of her favorite TV show... and fresh off a

Life's Rich Pageant

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little health scare.

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