

The Call of Fall

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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Writer's Note: The stress and chaos of "Irmageddon" left me depleted of time and energy last week, so I hereby offer up an old favorite from September 2015. I'll be back next issue with something new. Promise. - Margaret

The other night I found myself racing from Lady's Island across the Woods Memorial Bridge to Pigeon Point Landing, chasing a sunset. I had just dropped off my daughter at the Beaufort High football game, and was on my way home, when the sky over the river exploded in such inexpressible radiance that even now, I'm at a loss to describe it.

Which is why I was making a mad dash for the boat landing. I wanted to get a picture before the spectacle dissipated into darkness forever.

(Much like snowflakes, no two sunsets are the same.)

I felt wild and reckless, like a high school kid. I had my window down, my radio blasting vintage Kansas. "Carry on! You will always remember... Carry on! Nothing equals the splendor..." There'd be peace when I was done, but for now, this wayward daughter was speeding down Carteret Street like the oft-cited bat out of hell. I was on a quest. A mission. I would not be deterred. I was exceeding the 25 mph speed limit, baby, and nobody could stop me!

I arrived at my destination in the nick of time. The clouds were still glowing orange-vermillion over the water, like hot coals shifting and roiling in a heavenly fire pit, but the scene was clearly at its zenith. I jumped from my car and joined several other phone-photogs who were busily snapping away. I took a few pics - none of them good enough - only to be informed by my

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tiny screen that I could take no more. Seems I'd over-shot my quota that week and was out of storage. Damn. No choice but to stand there helpless and - gulp - let the moment pass unrecorded. As I stood watching the sky flame out, I was painfully aware that I would never see its like again.

It was an exquisite kind of pain, of course - the kind that feels almost like pleasure - so no worries on my account.

Sunsets are typically noteworthy here in the Lowcountry, but I think our fall sunsets are the best. It has something to do with the light, doesn't it? That golden fall light - the same light that burnishes leaves and filters through butterfly wings - makes for bolder, more poetic sunsets . . . sunsets that don't just dazzle the eye, they break the heart.

That's fall for you. All the audacious beauty of spring, with a delicious dash of melancholy, for heightened flavor. T.S. Eliot called April the cruelest month - "mixing memory and desire." With all due respect to the poet, I always thought that honor should go to October, the month that mixes sheer ecstasy with a sharp pang of mortality.

But, again, if October is the cruelest month, it's a cruelty that hurts so good.

And I can't help thinking of other bad rock cliches when I think about fall. *Going out in a blaze of glory . . . It's better to burn out than fade away . . .* In fall, it's as if the whole world is flushed and rosy with fever, intensely awake and alert in its final throes.

(Kind of like a middle-aged woman flying down the street in her station wagon, belting out a rock anthem from her youth, chasing a sunset that's disappearing before her very eyes.)

Most healthy, well-adjusted people don't think in these terms on a regular basis. (And thank God, too, because then navel-gazing odd ducks like me would be out of work.) But I believe that most of us sense, on some subliminal level, that the splendor of fall is more vivid - more precious - because it's slipping away. Nature is winding down. Despite our cheerful

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machinations to obscure this truth - we go back to school, hold church bazaars, watch football, throw parties - we earthlings, creatures of nature, are all aware, deep down, that the coming of fall signifies the beginning of the end.

That's why we love it so much, I think. Because it's flagrantly passing away. Fall reminds us not only how beautiful life is, but how fleeting. It hits us where we live. And where we die.

Think about the very word itself. "Fall" means what it sounds like. It comes from the Old English word "feallan," which means "to fall or to die." "Autumn," on the other hand, is a word shrouded in etymological mystery and doesn't seem to have the same connotations. This may be why the British have taken to using it exclusively.

Wimps.

As for me, I'll take "fall" every time. I love the drama of it . . . the tension . . . the tragic beauty.

The Victorian poet/priest Gerard Manley Hopkins addressed me personally - much like Judy Blume did a century or so later - when he wrote:

*Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?*

Yes. Yes I can. And I do. I grieve each falling leaf . . . each browning blade of spartina grass . . . each spectacular disappearing sunset. I grieve each reminder that we, like everything in nature, have our beginnings and our endings. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, to everything there is a season, and all that jazz.

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Yes, I grieve. And, oh, how I enjoy it! How I savor it. I relish that grief so much, in fact, that it almost feels more like joy.

So bring on the pumpkins, the cinnamon brooms, the spicy candles. And in the name of all that's holy, *bring on the sweater weather.*

It's been a long, hot summer. I'm ready.