

# The Last Days of Summer

by Stuart Millard

Everything looks better in the summer sun. Brighter, cleaner; it's as though the world's been hiding away in a fusty room for the last nine months, sleeping until noon and periodically masturbating straight into the waste paper bin. And then God barges in, choking back on the fetid air and yanking open the drapes with a cry of "get out there and do some living!" The world's barely done squinting before it remembers how beautiful it really is.

Families sit on folding chairs and blankets eating snacks and watching the performance. Attractive girls sunbathe on the grass, stretching their bodies out in the heat like cats on a driveway. A band play on a small stage; local musicians rocking out as if they were opening for Zeppelin. It's the slightly weedy music of the unsigned, but the spirit of the day has taken over, and unified by the music, by the sudden sense of community, hundreds of bystanders watch and dance and enjoy, together, with none of that lingering sense that they'd beat a stranger to death with a rubber bath mat just for looking at them the wrong way. They say that music can bring change, but it's not enough. What did Lennon ever do but inspire people to sit around smoking weed? True inspiration comes from sacrifice, and musicians aren't sacrificing anything besides a haircut and a stable job. They can stand up there and belt out their impassioned lyrics about being free or changing the world, but in the end, it's all just a hollow promise. But it doesn't matter. Not today.

A carefree woman in her late thirties is dancing by herself, unbothered by what people might think, just lost in the moment. She's wearing a thin summer dress, a string of daisies woven into a strand of braided hair, bare feet brushing against the soft green blades like a teenage friend's captivating, bohemian aunt. She holds out a hand, inviting me to join her, but I step back, politely refusing.

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The pack on my back is so heavy it's cutting into my shoulders, and it's just *so* hot, besides, I never was much of a mover. She takes the arm of another man and they sway together, twirling and spinning, a charades impersonation of ballroom dancers. She shoots me a wink, a "look what you've missed," but it's all in good fun.

Little kids screech past me, faces painted like Spider-Man and jungle beasts, running in gleeful, aimless circles. One fires tiny wet jets at the backs of the crowd from a water pistol that finds itself snatched into a mother's pocket. Their laughter is of a tiny world that knows nothing of taxes or lost loves, or news reports of flag-draped coffins filled with limbs. I used to get those dull twinges of regret, the pangs of having no family to call my own, destined to never be more than an uncle, but today, I don't mind. Today is beautiful.

On a glorious July Saturday such as this, there'd be little events going on all over the country, moments that they'd all remember forever; fetes, concerts, friends gathering to watch bands or shoddy amateur renditions of Shakespeare in the park, or to jostle for space on heaving beaches, stubbornly refusing to let the day come to a close as the evening sea chill blows a gentle whistle across the pile of empty beer bottles. If the weather had been bad, I don't know what we'd have done.

I feel my phone vibrate against my thigh. I don't have to check to know what it means. It's two o'clock. I wedge myself deeper into the crowd, moving into the pack, into the dancing throng close to the stage. I'm surrounded on all sides by people, one flower in a gently swaying meadow, each of us stretching ourselves towards the light, bending wherever the breeze takes us. My hand finds its way into my right hand pocket, clasping hold of the detonator. A small child rides on its parents shoulders. Teenage lovers hold hands against the railing. I take a deep breath. The happy bodies laughing in the afternoon sun brush against me, and my finger tightens.

All glory to God.

