

This may come as a shock – and may even be a minor form of blasphemy in these parts – but I'm not a summer person.



Never have been. Oh, I enjoy the season for a few weeks, sure, but I'm usually way over it way before it's over. I was always that annoying child who couldn't wait for school to start back (ah, the smell of a freshly-sharpened #2 pencil!), already pining for the crisp, poetic days of autumn by the time July 4th rolled around. And by the time August oozed in – that ponderous, suffocating slug of a month – I had long since hung up my bathing suit, kissed the Coppertone goodbye, thumbed my nose at the honeybees – and even the honeysuckle – and retired to my quarters with a book, full-time.

But I've got to tell you... this year, I'm lapping up summer like a kid with a melting ice cream cone. It's early days still, I know – summer's barely official – but I have this new sense of urgency, this need to squeeze every bit of juice from the season before it dries up. Life just feels too unpredictable these days, too ephemeral, to let a season go by – any season – without savoring it.

In fact, I find myself relishing the very thing I've always loathed about summer: the monotony. The drip-drip-drip of days that never end.... the hazy swathe of sky that never changes (except to break for the predictable afternoon thunderstorm)... the stifling air that never moves. It all suddenly seems... comforting. Monotony feels like a security blanket, something to count on, a sturdy raft in a world rushing forward like whitewater.

Because doesn't the world seem particularly turbulent lately? The polar opposite of monotonous? Sudden bursts of hateful violence – the murder of Dr. George Tiller in a church full of worshippers, the terrible rampage of James von Brunn at the Holocaust Memorial Museum – remind us that there are angry, smoldering hearts in our midst. Voices on TV and radio fan those flames for the benefit of advertisers and network heads, and we watch and listen to this "entertainment news" and think ourselves quite civilized. (Who needs gladiators when you've got Olbermann vs. O'Reilly?) Two young American journalists – one with a four year old child back home – are sentenced to 12 years hard labor in a North Korean prison camp, and we are shocked from our iPod-induced reveries by this reminder that Evil Dictators still exist, and not just as funny caricatures on the editorial page. And then there are those shattering moments when technology – that great liberator, that symbol of progress – fails us in a devastating way. The crash of Air France 447 took 200-plus lives in what must have been a few split seconds of sheer terror. While "200-plus" means little to me, I can hardly bear to think of the three young Irish doctors – one of them a dancer with Riverdance – on holiday together in Brazil, or the vacationing French couple who left two young children behind, or the 11-year-old boy returning to his English boarding school. I keep wondering if it was his first time flying alone. I keep wondering if anyone held his hand...

Closer to home: My mom told me on the phone, a couple of weeks ago, about a little boy who drowned at a birthday party down the street from where I grew up. He was six years old. It was a drop-off party, and the boy could swim, so his parents left him among friends at the local

pool – the one where I spent my summers as a child – where there were life guards on duty and parents milling about. And he drowned. Just like that. I don't know the details and they don't really matter. The point is that one minute your child... your baby... is excited and off to a birthday party – and maybe you're even excited about having a couple of hours to yourself – and the next minute...

Dear God, how precious a gift are our children? And in how many little ways, every day, do we fail to deserve that gift? How many times do we brush them off? Shush them? Listen to them with only half our hearts and minds?

And speaking of children... even my seven-year-old seems to have a heightened sense of life's fleeting nature, lately. The other night, we were snuggled up on the couch, discussing – I can't even remember what – when out of the blue, she burst into tears, crying, "Mom, I wish I were four! I wish I were four!"

"Why would you want to be four, sweetie?" I asked my frantic child, who was now sobbing uncontrollably. "You're almost eight, and eight's a wonderful age!"

Through tears, she managed to choke out, "When I was four, I used to wrap a blanket around my shoulders and run through the house playing Superman! And now when I do that... I feel stupid."

I just sat there, stunned. My daughter had just summed up, in two sentences, what her mother struggles to convey – using far too many words – in almost every column she writes. Out of the mouths of babes, right?

The poets keep finding new ways to say it, but it's always the same message: Life is so unbearably sweet because we can't hold onto it. We forget that truth for long periods of time, and that's probably for our own good. For me, however, it's a subtle, looming presence these days. Like a gnat buzzing somewhere just outside my peripheral vision, there's a vague but persistent notion I can't shake. I can't escape this feeling that the gentle, idyllic existence I've carved out for myself (with the help of my heroic, hard-working husband), this life of wrangling words and ideas and images for a living – and doing so from home, where I'm allowed to keep my Mom Hat on – can't last forever. Times are tough, especially in publishing, and all too soon, I fear, I'll have to re-enter the world of bosses and cubicles, time clocks and water coolers. (No, we are not on the brink of shutting down The Lowcountry. No rumors, please. But my fellow journalists have been dropping like flies over the past year, and I'm trying to think like a grown-up.) I've been working this way since my daughter was a year old, and I can honestly say it's been the happiest time of my life, an almost perfect balance of family and career. How many women long for such balance? How many actually find it? How can it possibly, possibly last in this world where 'nothing gold can stay'? I'm not quite ready to face the answer to that question.

So for now, I'll dig my heels (and sink my toes) into summer and the illusion that it's "endless." I'll take things nice and slow, won't make any rash decisions, no sudden moves. When I'm not working, I'll lie on the beach at Hunting Island, watch dolphins from the pier at Pigeon Point landing, hit the Farmers Market when it's not too hot, take a swim when it is. I'll just idle a while, and rejoice in the idling, giving thanks for every languid hour that creeps by. My most ambitious goal, I've decided, is to get my daughter hooked on Nancy Drew mysteries. Come mid-July, she may be ready to pull the shade on summer, and she'll need a good book or two ...