

A cure for August

Growing up on a tobacco farm, I always looked forward to August. I couldn't wait for the endless days, with everything covered in a thick humid fog and I'd race through rows of sticky leaves, then splash through the mud puddles that formed on the edges of the field.

Caesar Augustus himself would have envied those summers spent under the blazing eastern North Carolina sun. With no plans at all, I'd wake and grab my seersucker shorts, pull them on, usually inside out or backward, and tear down the stairs of our wooden country house into the white-hot morning to play.

Later I'd sneak into the tobacco barns beyond my yard and disappear, drinking in their cool darkness and the sweet smell of curing tobacco. I'd study the light that slipped through, watch it make brilliant stripes where it landed. Never was shelter so welcome or magical. Looking up at the leaves hanging on wooden beams, those spongy, fragrant sheaves seemed otherworldly, too rich and buttery for this one.

As a teenager, I'd sense the same delectable odor of tobacco curing as I walked to high school, and at night, to the football field for marching band practice. Tobacco was a sacred smell, reminding me of some deep happiness inside, a precious, fragile thing.

Of course some people don't like August. "No holidays. No family birthdays. Hot," a friend says.

"I don't like to sweat," another adds.

They've got a point. In August, grass fades and the flowers that looked so dewy and hopeful in June are holding on for dear life. The impatiens are leggy, the roses bare and skeletal. The first leaves have tumbled to the ground.

And these days, that celestial smell of full, ripe tobacco is almost impossible to detect, even in the heart of tobacco country. The warehouses are gone, replaced by drug stores and strip malls. The few remaining barns are broken heaps, fossils from another century left to slowly fall apart and disappear.

Maybe this August I'll do something crazy. Hide in my garden shed and pretend it's a barn. Wear seersucker shorts everyday. Sit on the porch fanning myself. Forget to work.

If I'm lucky, those smells -- of caramel and incense -- will come back and take me to a nether-time that is no longer summer, but not quite fall, and I'll remember how it felt when the whole world existed inside a pinewood barn.

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