

Back to School Rituals

Good Housekeeping

August 2001

I love Mondays! I do. I love Monday mornings. I like the buzz of an alarm clock at 6:55 on a Monday morning. This puts me at odds with my children who prefer, for example, Friday afternoons. The children's idea of a pleasant alarm clock is one that is still blinking 12:00, 12:00, 12:00 from a power outage last February.

Writ large, my fondness for Monday mornings surfaces as a real positive affection for the start of the new school year. This flies in the face of my children's deepest-held convictions. The children long for an endless summer: for turquoise nights of one last jump into the deep-end of the neighborhood pool, then scuttling, towel-wrapped, to spend the last slimy quarters from the bottom of the plastic pool basket before the snack-bar closes. My children find attractive the wet towels dripping from our fence and the piles of slippery flip-flops by the front door. They're fond of the blue-tinted popsicle sticks glued to every seat in the van, the inside-out bathing suits puddling on our bathroom floors, and the bunched-up sleeping bags left behind everywhere by sleep-over guests who emerged from their cocoons, ate their way through our cabinets, and fluttered away.

My children profess themselves mystified as to why summer Nirvana need ever end. The regimentation of the school year—during which their attention is targeted by school bells, buzzers, public address systems, whistles, hand-clapping, fire alarms, and car horns—wearies them; all this urgency and structure drains them, they feel, of drive and initiative. My children regard the start of a new school year as age discrimination, as a governmental assault on their privately selected lifestyles. While commiserating publicly with my children, secretly I am already counting which ones will need new backpacks this year and which ones new lunch boxes, and which friends shall I meet for lunch, once the children are back in school.

It's not that I don't remember my childhood summers. I remember them happily. I recall lying in the dewdrop grass early one morning when my businessman father opened the front door and, dressed in a suit and tie, headed for the driveway. I watched him from the prop of one elbow as a horrible insight hit me: summers were for children only! Adults had to go to work! Work! Even in summer! Adults had no

summer vacation! It was a moment of tragic realization and dread. I fell back and looked at the sky, lamenting the human condition to which I was heir.

As an adult, a reverse revelation has been mine: it is pleasant to have an orderly day. If there are children lounging barefoot in the grass, somewhere there is a mother in a kitchen surrounded by encrusted plastic macaroni-and-cheese bowls, overflowing garbage cans, and empty juice cartons, and the knowledge that between noon and 12:30, just as the kitchen counters and floor are wiped clean and shiny, her middle-school-age son and his just-awakening friends are going to hobble into the kitchen in their boxer shorts hoping for breakfast. As an adult I realized for the first time that it was possible—nay probably—to prefer March to August.

My children are *not* inspired by the example set by my husband and me, the two of us appearing nattily well-dressed and aggravatingly cheerful, Pop-Tarts and coffee mugs in hand, in the kitchen at 7:30 in the morning. No, the younger ones admire instead their older brother Seth, who, at age 16, really comes into his own around 11 p.m. every night. By 2 a.m., the sounds of Dave Brubeck and of Miles Davis and of his own compositions are booming behind his closed door and all the downstairs lights are back on. On a recent school holiday, Donny and I performed a sort of human experiment in which we did not wake up Seth at all, wondering how long it was physically possible for a person to sleep. When he staggered downstairs at 4:15 in the afternoon, looking ruffled, confused, and unhappy, his eyeglasses aslant and his curly hair bunched off to one side, he complained that he'd slept, actually, *too* long; that he'd finished one good night's sleep and gotten halfway started on tomorrow night and, as a result, felt groggy.

On a perfect summer day, my children's major meals of the day unfold as follows: breakfast, Coco Krispies at noon on the back porch; lunch, macaroni-and-cheese at 3:30 p.m., eaten while pleasantly shivering in damp bathing suits in the air-conditioned kitchen; and dinner at 8 pm, carry-out-pizza, eaten off paper napkins while wearing the now dry, stiff bathing suits and sitting on the gathered and heaped sleeping bags on the floor at the start of a rental movie. The older ones bake brownies at midnight, with promises to me, as I head up to bed, that they'll clean up. The next morning I'll discover that "cleaning up" means that they personally licked dry the mixing bowl and beaters.

My children enjoy the motherly smack of suntan lotion on their hot backs. They like wearing the same swim-trunks day and night, week after week, into and out of the shower. At least three of them, on any given day, have "pool hair," slightly greenish and with the sheen and hardness of wicker. I suspect one of my sons believes that Mr. Tooth Decay himself takes a summer vacation and therefore tooth-brushing must be performed only during the school-year.

My children relish the steamy, buggy afternoons of racing around the neighborhood screaming and attacking each other with bazooka water guns. They spend long hours playing games they've invented like "trampoline water balloons" and (girls) "let's dress Beanie Babies in Barbie clothes" and (boys) "let's attack Beanie Babies (in Barbie clothes) with water balloons."

Why, my children wonder, wouldn't any thinking human being prefer the warm fat round days of summer to the pale, bony, dry, stick-thin days of the school year?

Last fall, my seventh-grade son Lee was assigned a composition topic for his middle-school English class entitled "My Back-to-School Rituals."

My Back-to-School Rituals

My Back-to-School rituals really begin on the first day of summer. On that day I begin the whining that will make my mother's life miserable. 'Why is our summer so short?' I begin. 'I only have 74 days left. In Connecticut they don't go back until after Labor Day. Why did you vote for Governor Barnes who extended the school year in Georgia?'

I accomplish all this whining on the very first day."

By the end of the first week I can abbreviate my complaining with just a few words to make my mother know how I feel. '68 days. Why? Connecticut.'

I tell myself that if I accomplish nothing, the time will go by very slowly. My schedule is:

10 a.m. Wake up, watch SportsCenter on ESPN

11 a.m., Watch reruns of SportsCenter

12:30 pm: Read in the newspaper what I've already watched twice on ESPN
1:00 pm: Ask: 'When is the next gubernatorial election?'
3:00 pm: My mom convinces me to go to the pool and accomplish something. I reply, 'Why can't we move to Connecticut?'
3:15 pm: Ride my bike to the pool, eat another lunch, complain to my friends there, and ride home.
6:00 pm: Time for Evening SportsCenter.
10:30 pm: Convince my older sister to take me to Blockbuster. Rent Jackie Chan action flicks with no plot. Watch in awe as Jackie Chan beats somebody up using nothing but a necktie and a bag of flour. Maybe I could hire Jackie Chan to just pay a little visit to the Governor of Georgia.

Even though absolutely nothing is being accomplished, the time is still going by too fast. I work hard on doing even less. I spend an hour and a half doing the maze on the back of a Honey Nut Cheerios box. But the inevitable always happens. Even though Yogi Berra always said, "It ain't over till it's over," it's now over.

My last day of summer is different. Mom wakes us up at nine a.m. to 'prepare' us for the upcoming schedule. I wake up, mutter, 'Roy Barnes. No. No,' and go back to sleep. I get up and watch SportsCenter, but even the 'Plays of the Week' don't make me feel happy, for it is all over, over, over."

*

I know it's cruel to admit it, on top of such heartbreaking testimony, but though I knit my brows with tender sympathy, and say, "I know, sweetheart!", I have secretly been stocking the refrigerator with sacks of baby carrots, miniature yogurts, and apples, and the drawers with plastic spoons and sandwich bags. Toting home fresh boxes of No. 2 pencils from the grocery gives me a feeling of contentment and organization, like laying in firewood for the winter.

Won't I miss my children? Yes, I'll miss them terribly! When I sweep through the house in my jogging shoes on that first school morning, pitching hard-as-plywood beach towels onto a mountain of dirty laundry, and releasing softly-sighing armloads of sleeping bags into the basement storage room, dumping mildewy flip-flops and water-

wings onto the driveway for a hose-down, I will have a homesick feeling. When I do a quick survey of the backyard and turn up more towels, more flip-flops, half the plastic plates and cups we own, and the neighbor boy's swim-trunks (how did he get home that day?), I'll think of the sweet children who scattered them. At this very moment, I'll think, they are sitting erect on hard school chairs, wearing shirts, underwear, and shorts, matching socks and shoes with laces. They'll already look a little paler and drier, awake at this hour under those fluorescent lights and without the gloss of suntan lotion. I'll know the younger ones miss me, too, as they try to adjust to their new teachers and to detect whether any motherly kindnesses or indulgences are likely this year.

Still, I'll remind myself, there are lovely school-year pleasures ahead! PTA Open House nights, and Halloween, and construction paper turkeys, and winter musical extravaganzas (though how could they ever top last year's, a musical about precipitation?) And for me, there will be the satisfactions of returning to an empty house at 8:30 a.m., of warming up the computer as I throw the house into order, of sitting with a hot mug of coffee and a blank notebook on my lap to commence the day's writing. Yes, I love the children; yes, I'll miss the children; yes, I'll joyfully gather them all back in every afternoon at 3:00 and stand back as they begin the steady, practiced demolition of everything I've made ship-shape. And with equal love and happiness, I'll put them to bed at their bedtimes that night; and with love and happiness, and baggies of baby carrots, bid them adieu the next morning.

On the last day of summer, when I take the kids to the drugstore to begin their school supply purchases, they drift, with melancholia, to the Summer Sale aisle. Nine-year-old Lily runs her fingertips across the "Prices Slashed!" plastic goggles and flippers. She looks for all the world like Hans Christian Anderson's freezing Little Match Girl peering yearningly into a bakery window. Meanwhile, I am heard chortling over-loudly in the School Supply aisle, while heaving cartons of crayons and packages of notebook paper into the cart. For if the first day of school is Thursday of the coming week, can a Monday morning be far behind?