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# The Girls of Summer

Ann Mazzaferro  
*University of the Pacific*

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# The Girls of Summer

— Ann Mazzaferro

*THERE IS A PART OF ME THAT IS INCOMPLETE*

when it isn't summer. I can't help it, and I stopped trying to deny it years ago. For me, autumn has always been poignant and searing, a time to remember the transitory nature of life, a time to remember what we've lost. Winter has always rung false, with its jingling bells and forced smiles and the pressure to express goodwill to all mankind, dammit, because it's Christmas and that's what we're supposed to do. Besides, I've always hated the rain, and the cold, and the shapeless sweaters and bulky coats that make me feel as attractive as a stack of balding tires. And don't even get me started on spring. The pastel eggs, the gentle showers that feel like a cat spitting on you, the weather that can't make up its mind—all of it stands in the way of what I really want, and what I really want is summer.

I've been like this since I was a child in Southern California. To begin with, who can resist the lure of a summer vacation, that three month long stretch of freedom to do whatever one pleases? The memories of those early years are as brightly colored as the Popsicles that stained my tongue with lurid shades of orange, red, and purple. The air conditioner figures prominently into many of those memories, as they probably do for most Southern Californians. I loved the cool, crisp air drifting around me as I lay as still as possible, willing myself not to sweat, savoring the cold as my eyes were glued to the pages of "Little Women" or "Gone With the Wind."

Road trips take up a huge part of my mental landscape as well. My mom, my sister and I would pile into the teal blue minivan and race up the highway, a fish of a car, zooming against the traffic and the flashing lights, always on an adventure. One road trip took us up the El Camino Real, that long dusty stretch of road that connects all twenty-three of the California missions. For two weeks, my life was lived in sacred, crumbling adobe buildings and the sterile, convenient hotels that had cropped up nearby. More often than not, part of summer was spent at my grandmother's house in Mokelumne Hill, where the long days were spent gamboling like young colts through the seemingly endless pasture (in reality, only two acres), scraping my knees climbing the old walnut tree with its ground-sweeping branches, or learning how to fish in the nearby creek and eating the bounty later that night.

All of these memories drift through my mind, but no memory of my summers would be complete without the pool. It wasn't a very big pool, nor was it deeper than six feet, but it was the epicenter of my childhood summers, and even now the smell of chlorine makes me giddy. Surrounded by iron bars that were choked with vines, the pool was in the center of my housing complex. Oddly enough for Southern California, the pool was usually deserted during the day and well into the evening, giving my family and I free reign over its watery depths.

When I speak of my family, I don't just mean my mom, sister and I (again, Dad was always gone, especially after the divorce). No, my family was much larger than that, forged by ties stronger than blood or a common name. It was (and still is) multi-generational, multi-lingual, and as unconventional as it was nurturing and loving.

There were my two mothers, to begin with—I always thought of ours as a matriarchal tribe. My mom, Kathy, was always the spotlight of the event, throwing the beam of her smile wildly around the slippery patio of a stage. I have no memory of those summers that isn't accompanied by the roar of her laugh. An explosion of sound, it would bounce around the starry darkness, occasionally reaching pitches that prompted local dogs to reply with frenzied barking. Surrounded by music, my mother never stopped us kids from singing, dancing, or story-telling, giving those days an air of freedom and self-expression that lasted long after our tans had faded away.

My other mother had an equally profound impact on those summer days, and on the rest of my life. Trudy, my mother's best friend and mother to my own best friend, was from Germany, and she still speaks with a lilting accent that makes everything seem exotic or profound. She adored to cook, and knew everything there was to know about food and wine. While most families were grilling hamburgers or steaks on adjacent barbecues, Trudy would commandeer the pit under a trellis of wisteria and begin to release her own brand of magic. I knew how to properly crack a crab, shuck an oyster and open a bottle of wine (which I didn't drink) before I was ten,

and began to dream of collecting my own endless supply of white linen table cloths and wineglasses before I hit puberty.

It was a heady way to spend a summer, but it is to both of my mother's credit that we children never grew blasé, or bored, or took it for granted. We were just as happy and grateful munching on Del Taco from down the street as we were eating duck and risotto. Neither of my families were incredibly wealthy, and our housing community was an un-gated complex not far from the university in town. But the women in my family knew how to save, and how to hold things in reserve, and they knew when to let themselves go.

While our parents dominated the patio and hot tub, my sisters and I considered the pool itself our own private world, regardless of who else was in it. As with my two mothers, I have two sisters from two different families, but both as beloved as though the same blood ran through our veins. Amy, my little sister by birthright, was all dimples and frowns. Her eyes could size up how much trouble she could get into versus how much fun the undertaking might prove faster than her little legs could move. Monique was Trudy's daughter, and my best friend since our first day together in kindergarten. She was always tall, and it always seemed that our bodies were in competition to see who might reach six feet first. Together, the three of us would throw our bodies into the pool with unabashed glee, splashing and diving with heedless abandon. We would swim and dive until we wore the skin off of the bottom of our toes, requiring Barbie bandages as we limped home at the day's end.



Those waters were where we shared our deepest secrets (usually which boys we liked and which ones were gross) and dreams (to be an actress for me, a writer for Monique, princess of the world for Amy), and where we made our pinkie swears and developed our own highly coded language that shielded us from outside ears. Our pursuits were not without their earthier qualities. As children, we picked up on our parent's rather colorful vocabularies, and our language was peppered with German profanities from Trudy before we even could fully understand their implications in English. Once, Trudy's mother was visiting from Germany, and all of us were playing cards at one of the round, pebbled glass tables that bordered the pool. After a particularly bad hand, my eight year old sister slapped her cards on the table and gasped "Schisse!", which means "excrement" in German. The poor old woman nearly fell off of her chair and pointed her toes to heaven, shocked to hear such oaths being lisped by a second grader.

That pool was my second home—I was in love with its azure depths, insisting on plunging in regardless of the weather. When winter rolled in and smothered the sun with clouds, my parents would take us to the hot tub to defrost from the mid-sixty degree chill. Amused and slightly confused, they would watch as I insisted on diving into the legitimately chilly pool, masking my chattering teeth with a bright grin. Try as I might, I could never recapture the magic of summer in those waters. It was as if I believed the chlorine would release a chemical reaction that would transport me back to my summer self, the water sprite that I believed was truly me. Even though no

such magic happened, I kept diving, believing that I would stumble upon the magic the same way I might stumble upon a lost penny. It would require a sharp eye, keen timing, and sheer dumb luck. After my parents divorced when I was eleven, my mother and sister and I moved to Northern California, where there was no public swimming pool for miles; I was terrified that the magic would be gone forever.

It's only now, of course, that I realize the pool itself wasn't magical. The people who surrounded it, however, were. The women who enfolded my summers taught me how to dream, to seek adventure, to dance, to live in the moment. I didn't realize it at the time, but those childhood summers by the pool created a strong pattern that has carried through the rest of my life. Though I've had many important relationships (romantic and otherwise) with men in my life and cherish my male friends deeply, I have always known that it is the bonds of friendship that women share with other women that are among the most important any woman can have. Even now, as I work through my summers instead of swimming through them, I find myself with a core of strong, vibrant sisters by summer's end, without even realizing that I've been seeking it.

I still return to that pool to this day. Once every summer, my family and I pile into the car (a silver PT Cruiser having long since replaced the teal minivan) and trundle down the highway to Southern California from the family abode in Northern California. We stay with Trudy and Monique and the rest of their family for a week, spending half of it adrift in that very same pool. Of course, Monique and Amy and I

aren't children anymore, and we spend a fair amount of time stretched out on towels sunning ourselves rather than swimming. We're old enough to drink with our mothers now, and they are no longer impervious to change or mortality. Trudy's blonde hair is artfully graying, and my mother possesses a full head of silver.

But the music remains. The laughter remains. I take that week and save it, holding it in reserve through the sad autumns and freezing winters and banal springs until summer comes around again.

Until I can let myself go.

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