

Labour Day is a Dreaded Bell in the Schoolyard of the Mind

Harry Bruce

Labour Day was like a sniff of the woods or a glimpse of the sea before they led you down to the dungeon. All other statutory holidays were an escape from school. Labour Day was its entrance, the stairway to an aeon of misery, a last meal, a last drag on a cigarette. At a cabin on a widening of the dark Magnetawan River, I'd sometimes smell Labour Day's deadly gloom as early as mid-August. While birch crackled in the kitchen stove and pancakes sizzled at breakfast, while I played rummy by coal-oil lantern or knocked about in a leaky punt under singing trees, while I routed the evil sheriff in my own Sherwood Forest, and even as I lifted a forkful of home-made raspberry pie to my mouth, a cold bell might ring in the far schoolyard of my mind. It was a signal. Now, Labour Day was yawning, getting to its feet, slouching toward me. It would take me back. All this would end.

I hated school. If Tom Hansen, 24, of Boulder, Colorado, wins his \$350,000-suit against his mother and father for ruining his life with "psychological malparenting," I'm going to hit the Toronto education authorities for the psychological malteaching they put me through. School was hot, degrading, boring and occasionally terrifying, a house of despair in which big tyrants tormented small victims. The teachers, like prison guards, knew society wanted their institutions to be unpleasant for us inmates; and the worst punishment they could inflict, next to The Strap, was a "detention." It was an order to do extra time in the hole (school).

The vocabulary of discipline and insult, the smell of chalk and ink and old chewing gum, the feel of the hardwood bench under your haunches, the sickening realization that things would be this way till the end of an inconceivably distant June . . . all these awaited us on the

morning after going to bed on Labour Day. After Christmas, kids asked one another, "Wud ya get?" After Labour Day, they asked, "Who'd ya get?" I'd say, "Mr. Such-and-such" or "Miss So-and-so." In a cruel flash, I'd learned the name and scowl of the adult who would dominate my daylight hours for ten months to come; and the other kid always replied, "You poor sucker."

Good morning, Miss Authoritarian. Good-bye, bonfires on the beach. Hello there, line-ups, marching in columns of two, standing stiffly at attention, sitting with your hands folded on your desk, keeping your trap shut. Good-bye picnics on the flat, sun-baked stone of deserted islands, good-bye blackberry bushes in bee-loud glades. Hello, scribbler and ruler. Good-bye, cry of the loon, depredations of the racoon, sunburn at noon, and hide-and-seek by the light of the moon. Good morning, *sir*.

There's another side to the Labour Day story, of course. Sadly, slowly, as though he were savouring the last moments of our crashing shore in Nova Scotia, an old friend from Toronto folded his tent, loaded his van. The Labour Day weekend had started, and he had 1,300 miles to drive. "Why not stick around a few days?" I said. "Can't," he grunted. "Got to be in class Tuesday morning." My friend is a high-school teacher. "Jeez, I hate Labour Day," he said, and rumbled out of my life for a few more seasons.

Labour Day is the prelude to work, and the death of play. Down at the Canadian National Exhibition, the unions are on parade. Out around the country, traffic fatalities mount. Thousands of family cars mournfully crawl away from wilderness retreats to city duties. Thousands of guitars, hibachis, sleeping bags, bathing suits, car-top boats, golf clubs and fishing poles are city-bound. Thousands of young lovers wonder if, ever again in another summer, they'll see the golden partners with whom they've recently lost their virginity. Will he, or she, really write? Can a fair-weather romance survive the killer winter? Camps close, and board up the season. Hotels cut their rates, and banish staff. Is that tree dead, or is it just that its leaves have already begun to turn? The chestnuts ripen. The days are shorter, and the nights cooler. Labour Day is a bummer.

Earlier than I needed to know, it taught me that no summer ever repeats itself, friendships must die, good times must always end, and the years melt people and beloved places. Of all holidays, Labour Day is the one that makes you grow up. And feel old. Nowadays, I dislike it more than ever.