

Byron

Of all the wonderful ways that summer arrived, the best was in the back of a 1937 Ford pickup truck. Somewhere in the 10 days before the Fourth of July, the primer-dappled harbinger clattered around the bend beneath the Butler's house and ground squeakily to a stop in front of the Cabana, delivering us from nine months in purgatory.

Before the truck's wheezy engine gasped its last, Byron Jessup, St. Malo's lifeguard -- who would have had the job for life had it been up to me -- leaped from the cab to greet his admirers, hurling himself as wholeheartedly and guilelessly into the exuberance of the occasion as we did. It was Christmas, everyone's birthday, and "school's over" all wrapped into one...only better because here all the joys were to be renewed daily until the end of the Labor Day weekend. That was when Byron would stuff the tools of his trade into the back of the pickup, dispense gentler hugs and handshakes to the crestfallen throng, and chug painfully up the hill. Once he was around the bend I would feel all the ravages of winter and school wash over me, an unfair avenger loosed from some conscienceless hell for what in my despair seemed likely to last an eternity.

But between the rattletrap bookends of our renaissance lay rights-of-passage whose wonder and magic burn as brightly half-a-century later as those beach fires that brought weenies and marshmallows (grit, wind, and sandfleas clapped into the bargain) to the pinnacle of Epicurean perfection.

Perfect in its endless witness was the bright sun striking fire from the glistening strand as long rollers warped stealthily through the cobalt depths before thrusting sharply up their spume-veined walls, there to crest ominously, tentatively teetering an instant longer than anyone else's gravity permitted before plunging resolutely to a crashing death. All the while, feisty gulls wheeled and screeched above the foaming battleground raging between the outer and inner breaker lines; sandpipers strutted the surging flood whose frothy fingers laid siege to crumbling ramparts of slack-tide sand castles, tearing away their latticed battlements and bearing the folly of defenders to a ceaseless grave.

God may have been in his holy temple presiding over the fate of fools, but it was Byron who sat St. Malo's throne behind no-nonsense sunglasses, zinc-oxidized nose, maroon swim trunks; whose heavily seared copper-rich bronze freckled skin turned smokier by the afternoon hour as the descending sun spun golden cobwebs on wave tops as far towards China as our imaginations would take us.