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MARGARET THON

# The Ballad of Summer '72

Dewey met Dawn exactly one month after he became a graduate of Coburg High School and exactly two weeks after becoming a full time employee of the creamery in Springfield.

She rolled into town with suede boots up to her knees, shorts up to her belly button, and a white collared blouse tucked neatly in. His best friend Peter hadn't warned him about her arrival. Why would he? She was Peter's cousin from Seattle and her divorcing parents wanted her to spend time in the Oregon countryside for the summer, away from the city, away from the mess of ending a twenty-year marriage. The city burst from her like her round breasts burst out between the buttons of her blouse. That first day, Dewey sat on Peter's orange loveseat, and listened to her sing-song voice jabber away about everything he had never heard about before in Coburg.

"Have you listened to the new Pink Floyd album yet?" Dawn asked. Dewey knew the band, but didn't care to keep up with their album releases. Music didn't really interest him all that much. "Oh come on, man, you've got to! It's gotta be their best one yet!" She released an exasperated breath. Her teeth were so straight, and her pale thighs were porcelain against the eggplant armchair. Dewey wished he had changed from his work boots and sweat-stiff T-shirt before coming over to Peter's house. He searched his brain, desperately trying to think of something interesting to say to Dawn.

"I work at a creamery. We make yogurt." The words tumbled from his mouth, having nothing to do with the latest music trends, and causing heat to rush from his toes to his eyebrows.

“Nice one, tomato face,” Peter whispered low enough for only Dewey to hear.

“Ooooooh.” Dawn opened her eyes wide. “That is so awesome. I love yogurt. Seriously, it seems like that’s all I eat now. I’ve been a vegetarian for two weeks. I read some article in *Mother Earth News* and it talked about all the shit meat production does to the environment and all the people who are starving that could be fed using the land we keep cattle on.”

Dewey ran his fingers nervously through his greasy brown hair—he didn’t know how to respond. How was she filled with so much knowledge? He felt like he knew so little.

“Yeah, yeah, I thought about doing that once,” Dewey lied.

“No, you have NOT, you had a triple-dog-hot-dog at dinner last night.” Peter ratted Dewey out.

Dawn just smiled, ignoring her cousin. “Well, I could give you some pointers if you wanted to try again.”

Dewey realized she was the kind of girl who always knew what to say.

“I’d like that.” His green eyes locked with her brown ones, and Dewey swore they could hear his heart beating all the way to the silent monasteries of India.

“So what’re you boys doing tomorrow night? It is Saturday, after all.” Dawn raised her eyebrows mischievously.

“Uh, drinking some beers. Maybe having a fire out back by the barn,” Peter responded. Dewey and Peter had been taking every chance they got to enjoy the summer—the risk of getting drafted was always in the back of Dewey’s mind, but never discussed. Dewey felt as if they had an unspoken agreement; if one of them got sent, the other would go too. That was just the kind of friends they were.

“Fire, yes. Beers, nah. I’ve got a better idea.”

The first time Dawn kissed Dewey, he was high on her Seattle peyote, and the willow tree he was standing under looked like it was part of a comic book. His fingers tangled themselves desperately in her blonde ponytail, each individual strand becoming its own spaghetti entity on his sweaty skin. His eyes widened as her cubic face moved toward him and her pillow lips grazed his sandpaper ones. A few feet away, the fire crackled to the beat of Dewey’s heart, and Peter was staring at the ground, captivated by the movement of his tennis shoe in the dirt.

“I like you, Dewey, even though you’ve got a silly name. It’s like a nickname you’d give your friend who is always doing something. Or do you just have a perpetual sheen of morning dew on you?” Dawn’s words sounded mish-mashed to Dewey, and the flames of the fire framed her body, creating a soft cocoon around her and making her pale skin glow.

“It’s my grandpa’s name, and I like you too, Dawn.” This time Dewey glued his lips to hers, wishing the adhesive was permanent. Maybe it was the drugs, or maybe it was Jimi Hendrix’s staticky solo on the transistor radio in the background, but in that moment Dewey knew Dawn Montgomery was definitely going to be his girl.

Every day after work, Dewey would speed to Peter’s house on his bicycle, straight out of the city of Springfield and into Coburg’s rolling fields of corn and looming red silos reaching for the sky. He would run into Peter’s house to call his grandma and tell her he would be home late. His fingertips still ripe with the scent of sour milk, he would walk hand in hand with Dawn, around the quaint dairy farm. They never had a destination, until the day they found the small knoll in the woods behind the barn. They would lay down, letting the sun warm their bodies and the grass tickle them through their shirts, their hands always finding the neck or arm or thigh of the other. The sugary aroma of the flowers filled their nostrils and the KWRS station on Dawn’s radio whispered tunes that Dewey had never heard.

Dewey couldn’t get enough of talking to Dawn. Words flowed from his mouth as easily as the honey yogurt at the creamery stirred in the big silver vat. She told him she wanted to go to college after she graduated next year, and he told her about his dream to partner up with Peter and make the dairy farm into a state-wide business. Her nose scrunched at their plan—he should go to school and get a business degree, plus the farm was way better off staying local and homegrown, she said. Dewey shrugged it off, telling her that he had known since the sixth grade that college wasn’t for him. His grandma barely made enough money as a secretary to support the two of them, even with his full-time job, let alone pay for school. Dawn suggested he pick up more hours and save, and then they could go to Oregon State together in a year. He nodded, even though he knew he would never be smart enough to get in.

Nonetheless, on the Monday following the conversation about their futures, Dewey walked into the creamery with a mission. As he entered the cool building, the early August sweat on his face began to dry. He mazed his way through the stainless steel mixers, the refrigeration systems, and his coworkers

before arriving at his labeling station. He straightened the pile of white labels with maroon print and immediately began gluing them to the plastic cups.

“Off to an early start this morning, Dewey.” The shift manager placed his hand on Dewey’s shoulder.

“Hey, Mr. Brown, I was wondering if I could pick up a few shifts here or there? I’m trying to save.” Dewey looked up eagerly at his six-foot-three manager.

“I don’t know, Dewey. You already work forty hour weeks,” Mr. Brown said.

Dewey picked at the pile of labels in front of him. “Please.” Dewey could only think about Dawn—and her hopes for him.

“You didn’t hear this from me, but the creamery isn’t doing so well. We’re deciding who to let off—you being a new employee isn’t really in your favor right now, Dewey.”

“What can I do?” Dewey asked. He would have to start looking for a second job tomorrow. Maybe Peter’s dad would hire him part time; he could do odd jobs around the farm.

“Actually, maybe there is something you can do. There’s a big band coming to town. The owners know them, I guess, and they’re coming here to play a benefit. They’ve got a huge following or something. Said they want to help save a local business—it’s what they stand for or something. Anyway, tell your friends, and buy some tickets. This is really the creamery’s last chance.”

“I’ll take three.”

The first time Dewey brought Dawn home to meet his grandmother, he was even more nervous than when he was a participant in Coburg’s fifth annual third grade spelling bee. He was hoping this case of the nerves wouldn’t impact him as much as when he was eight, as he had had to run out the gym and throw up in the bathroom before he had even spelled out one word.

Dewey tried to squash the churning in his stomach with his fist as he walked into the living room. He had already put away his blanket and pillow—he didn’t want Dawn to know his bedroom was their living room as well. Dewey had already told Dawn about his house but she hadn’t actually faced the situation yet. The once fluffed brown carpet was worn down flat, the upholstery on the chair and couch was frayed, and their small kitchen was littered with pill bottles—evidence of his grandma’s age. In her younger years, she had kept the house in tip-top shape, making its small size seem insignificant. Nowadays, his grandmother’s fading health and full-time job made housekeeping too large of a task at the end of the day. One day, Dewey knew he would buy his grandmother the nice home that she deserved to retire in, with floral furniture and a big window to set her chair by.

"When's she getting here, Dewey?" His grandmother asked. "The chili's going to get cold." His grandmother's opinion of Dawn was yet another worry of the night. He glanced out the window, his foot tapping repetitively on the floor.

"Soon, Grandma, soon. Be nice to her, okay? I really like this girl."

"Really liking a girl at your age is trouble." His grandma frowned. She had been strict with him growing up, but fair. She'd been stuck with him ever since his mom, her daughter, died in childbirth, and his dad skipped out of town a year later. Dewey knew he was lucky to have her. His hands flushed with sweat when he heard the doorbell ring. He leaped from the chair, wanting to get to the door before his grandma.

"Hey, Dawn!" He sounded overly enthused for having seen her only an hour before. She scrunched her eyebrows in a look that said he was acting weird.

"Hi, Mrs. Douglas, it's so nice to finally meet you. Dewey has only ever had great things to say about you." Dawn towered over his grandma as she hugged her.

His grandma put a hand to her chest, laughing, "Oh, now does he? I guess he failed to mention my reaction to the time the neighbors caught him leaving a paper bag of cow poo on their doorstep for the next innocent victim?"

"Did he really do that? What an awful child. He deserved every bit of punishment for that one." Dawn laughed as Dewey's grandma led her by the shoulders into the kitchen. Dawn turned her head back to Dewey, winked, and mouthed, "I got this."

And for the rest of the night, Dawn did have it. He could barely get a word in edgewise while the two women in his life, old and new, chattered away.

"I don't think I like them all that much," Peter said, looking skeptically at the ticket before shoving it back into his pocket and picking up a rake.

"C'mon, you can't miss out on these guys. They are so far out!" Dewey shoveled a pile of manure into the heaping wheelbarrow. Peter's dad had agreed to hire him in the afternoons after all. It was the first time he had really hung out with Peter since Dawn had arrived.

"Dawn told you all that, didn't she? You've never even listened to them, have you?" Peter asked.

"Well, not really. But they are cool. And this will help the creamery! C'mon, man, we're like blood brothers and you need to help a brother out," Dewey begged.

"I guess I owe them something for all the milk they supplied me in elementary school," Peter said scratching his head. "I'll go, but don't expect me to stand around and watch you throw yourself at Dawn the whole time. She's just a flirt, stringing you along for the summer." Peter had stopped raking out the hay and grabbed Dewey's shoulder.

"I just think she's so...perfect. I think she might be—"

Peter's arm fell back to his side. "Shit, man. Don't even say it. Dawn is not the girl you're going to marry. She's here for the summer and that will be fun, but after that she's off to senior year and then college. She's always had big plans. Not to mention, she has plenty of dudes falling over her in Seattle, I'm sure. Ones that are going to be lawyers and doctors. Do I have to smack some sense into that thick tomato head?"

"We'll be business men soon, Peter," Dewey said.

"Are you stupid? That's never going to happen, Dewey, that was just us kids talking. For all we know, we're both going to get called up to Vietnam tomorrow. If not, well, I'm going to work on the farm until my dad's back gives out for good, then I'll take over completely. You, you're going to work at the creamery, maybe move through the ranks to shift manager. We aren't going anywhere, Dewey. Got it?"

Dewey nodded, but he didn't get it. Peter's words sounded to him like jealous slurs. Dewey knew that Peter was upset that he was spending so much time with Dawn, and so little with him. He was upset that Dewey's life was coming together so quickly, and his was the one going nowhere. Dewey wasn't going to let Peter's jealousies convince him that his feelings for Dawn were false. He wasn't going to let Peter degrade the dream they had talked about since they were young. The friends worked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, breathing in the potent fumes of cow manure.

When Dewey arrived at Peter's house the day of the benefit concert, sweat was already soaked through his T-shirt, and the late August heat was baking him like a cake in the oven. As he walked up the uneven steps of Peter's house, Dewey wondered if his friend would be joining them. He hadn't seen him since their confrontation in the barn. Before he even got to the door, a twirling Dawn exploded through it and into his arms.

"I am so unbelievably excited for today!" she sang.

"Me too!" Dewey tried to match her enthusiasm as he looked over her shoulder trying to see if Peter was in the foyer.

"But you have no idea how long I've waited to see this band. Oh my, I'm sorry but I would leave you for any one of them. I've missed the Seattle music scene so much."

“Well, we had better get going,” Dewey said, distracted and trying not to sound too disappointed that Peter wasn’t coming. The pair was halfway down the driveway before Dewey heard the screen door slam.

“How do you chumps expect to get to the concert in this heat?” Peter asked, dangling the keys to his dad’s truck. “C’mon, hop in.”

The trio arrived at the venue early in order to get the best spot possible. After snaking their way through all of the cars, heat waves rippling off the hoods, they finally found themselves in the sprawling grassy lawn. They were two hours early and already hundreds of people were crowded around the stage. Dewey felt like every time he turned around, the swarm of bodies on the lawn increased and the prevalence of armpits doubled by the minute. The creamery was going to make so much money. Dawn pulled out a Sucrets tin from the pocket of her overalls.

“Hey, give me one of those.” Dewey held out his hand. Dawn did not pull a cough drop out of the tin as he expected.

“How about one of these?” She smiled with her eyes as she placed the joint between her lips and expertly struck a match.

“Even better, I suppose.”

By the time the band came onstage, Dewey’s mouth was as dry as the bota bag of wine they had brought from home. There was no water to be found at the concert, but Dewey didn’t care—no one cared. As soon as the guitarist’s fingers struck the first chord the entire crowd—Dewey had estimated it was over twenty thousand people by now—began bobbing to the rhythm. Men and women alike had stripped naked, from heat and hazy drugs. Breasts hit off-beats. Bodies bounced off each other creating a slippery sea of skin in front of Dewey. Babies sat high on the shoulders of their ponytail rocking fathers, waving their arms in glee. The singer’s easygoing vocals projected across the lawn, filling Dewey’s head with a cloud of happiness.

In a few years, Dewey would be reminded of this moment of unadulterated joy as he drove with Peter to Lane Community College to attend their first business class. It was the first time he would hear the song since that day. He would remember Dawn, and how she had left him a week after the show, rolling out as quickly as she had arrived. He’d remember the postcard she’d send him later that year from New York. She had snagged a secretarial position with a top recording company. Dawn never went to Oregon State, Dewey’s grandmother died in the summer of 1973, and it had taken him three years at the creamery to save up enough money to take a college course.

“Remember this show, man? Damn. Those were the days,” Peter would say.



“Yeah, I remember the sagging hippie you left me for that night.” Dewey would laugh. Peter would punch Dewey in the arm. The pair would drive silently the rest of the way to the campus. Dewey would wonder about what other Dawns life would throw at him.

That day at the concert, with the crooning guitar melody echoing throughout his body, Dewey was utterly content with his life. He turned to his left and grinned. Peter was entranced by the music blasting from the speakers, his arm draped around the shoulders of a woman with a gray-streaked braid plastered to her back and worn-in cowboy boots dancing in the dirt. Dewey turned to his right and grabbed Dawn’s hands. He had never really danced before in his life, but in that moment the music told him exactly what to do. His feet scuffed the dirt beneath them, his arms moved back and forth, tethered to Dawn’s, and his eyes never left hers. Note after note, chord after chord, song after song Dewey danced there with Dawn’s sweaty palms plastered to his.

Before Dewey knew it, the sun had set and the heat of the day had turned into the heat of the night. Dewey’s entire body was buzzing from the music and the high right up until the very last note blasted across the lawn and the mass of bodies began moving towards the parking area. Peter was nowhere to be found, having left with the woman sometime during the second set. And to think he was worried about Dewey ditching him.

“He’ll meet us at the truck,” Dawn said, pulling Dewey’s arm.

The first time Dewey made love to Dawn it was in the back of a rusted blue pickup after the benefit show. The sky was clear, a guitar strummed in the distance—the only reminder of the thousands of others stuck in the parking lot jam for the night. Hay from the truck bed stuck to Dewey’s back, scratching him as Dawn pressed herself down, her corn silk hair curtaining over her face and tickling his chest. It only lasted a few moments, but Dewey and Dawn lay clasped in each other’s sticky embrace for the remainder of the night. Jazzy jams echoed in their minds and their eyelids drooped listlessly, inches apart from each other, neither one wanting to break the contact with sleep. Neither one wanting to think about the decisions they would have to make in the week to come. To leave or to love.