

While I've written essays in these pages about February, June, August and November, it's always October that's been my favorite, and it's the month I saved for last in this series. Nothing can compete with the colors. Nothing can compete with October's drama as the Earth tilts just so, as shadows grow longer with each moment.

There were those Sunday afternoons in October when my friends and I, in our late teens and early 20s, headed to the Polo Field in Moreland Hills. We had a few footballs among us that rolled around inside our beater cars. Mine was a 1963 Ford Galaxie that I bought for \$150 and fixed with a hammer, until the engine caught fire and I called the junkyard to haul it away.

The air was as crisp as an apple not yet fallen. The sunlight was slanted and easy, just bright and warm enough to take the chill out of the breeze rolling in from the north, down the old Indian path from Lake Erie, now called Chagrin River Road.

Some of us were pretty good athletes, some not so good, but the elation of being young and able to play equalized us. I have no idea who won those games. I know we cared deeply for about five minutes after the final silent whistle, and then forgot it.

That's just like October: remembering, forgetting and remembering again.

One October, a couple of years before those seasons of touch football, a couple of friends and I headed to Massachusetts. We'd just seen *Alice's Restaurant*, the movie based on the Arlo Guthrie song of the same name. The movie was filmed near where one of my friends grew up, and we decided to drive there over an October weekend during our senior year. Why not? We were, after all, seniors, and we needed answers. Alice, we were convinced,



would be thrilled to see us, and she'd tell us the secrets to life. We'd come home in time for school Monday morning, enriched by her proto-hippie wisdom.

After a 12-hour drive, winding through the Allegheny and the Berkshire mountains in a 1964 Plymouth Valiant that ran about as well as my Galaxie, we knocked on the door of Alice's Restaurant. An old man – he must have been 50! – opened the door. He said Alice was gone, moved to Washington, D.C., “because of freaks like you kids.”

So we left, and headed back with only our memories. Well, no, that's not right either. There were no real memories, only 24 hours of driving to see a woman who had had one too many teenagers bang on her door, asking her the meaning of life.

Yet I would learn something of the meaning of life, on that makeshift football field, a little later.

I'd learn that heaven is when and where you tell yourself it is, for I recall, with complete clarity, saying to myself, “If there's a heaven, they play touch football on a day just like this.”

It was one of those golden moments when I was fully engaged in life, and yet fully aware that it's finite; at 19, I knew King Solomon's words were true: This too shall pass.

Some of my friends from those games are gone now. One, who often played quarterback for the rival team,

and with whom I would argue during the game, then laugh my head off with afterwards, had a massive, fatal heart attack two and a half years ago, while walking down the street. Another, the fastest and funniest, died from the booze that he could not kick, though he called me days before he died to tell me about a new treatment he was looking forward to. The list goes on, I'm afraid: suicide, illness, an accident.

I honestly wonder sometimes, in October, when the sun lands softly on the stunning leaves of northeast Ohio, if playing in those games will someday be on the schedule in heaven. I'd like that, but not for a while. For I continue to find more slices of heaven in October: in the eyes of a woman, in the laugh of a child, or in solitary moments, when I'm outside and breathe in the scent of decomposing leaves and the cold night air, under October stars.

Friends and loved ones, I've learned, don't stay any longer than those red and gold leaves of a long-ago October Sunday stayed on the trees. We eventually all fall to the ground and turn into something else; perhaps we become part of someone else's October, someone else's heaven.

Each of us has our own October. It's up to us to find the beauty in ours while we have it. ■

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