

# Twelve Days

Julianna McCarthy

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**THE TWELVE DAYS IN AUGUST WHEN  
HERMAN LYTELL RESCUED A HALF-DROWNED KITTEN FROM  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL THUGS PUMPING WATER FROM A FIRE HOSE  
INTO THE HALL LOCKER WHERE THEY HAD TRAPPED IT  
& I GOT TO KEEP THE KITTEN  
& THE UNITED STATES  
DROPPED THE ATOM BOMB  
ON HIROSHIMA  
& NAGASAKI  
& THE WAR ENDED  
& I TURNED 16.**

MONDAY, AUGUST 6

The force of a hundred suns, bright beyond white,  
blast enough to curl the edges of the world,  
sear the brain and cripple comprehension.  
Acres of dead:  
half-way to the moon in body count.

Newspaper photos arrive.  
Scenes of devastation, such suffering  
I run outside gasping  
for the comfort of trees.

A world born anew,  
new words, new fears, new guilt.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 7

Three fat years: a fine crop of boys to feed the generals.  
Then lean years – with younger and younger boys.  
No deferrals outside of time's parentheses.  
Plenty of space in empty college classrooms  
for eleventh graders like me,  
for boys waiting to be called.

I am studying set design – perspective and illusion.  
My drawing board has a handle.  
With a T-Square wedged at its edge  
and a triangle, I can draw an absolute straight line.  
With a compass I can describe a perfect circle.  
Sight lines make the difference.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8

What sounds like distant thunder  
is the rumble of three yellow buses  
pulling onto campus with Franklin High's  
football team, here for training camp.

Mostly sophomores & juniors –  
anyone over 17 drafted or enlisted –  
they seem frail in spite of their whoops,  
their swagger as they strut across the field.

They call the week ahead "Boot Camp":  
a tough haul of calisthenics, scrimmages,  
pummeling, pounding, brutal rehearsal  
for pitifully moot battles. Nothing ventured,

nothing lost. Today  
the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics  
declares war  
on the Imperial Empire of Japan.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9

Parachuting from a B-17 –  
under its silken carapace –  
the second Atom bomb  
spirals deliberately  
into Nagasaki.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10

A kitten, black and white  
butler cat,  
piano cat,  
the kind named Jeeves,  
Steinway, Baldwin  
metal locker,  
dark, hot & now  
wet,  
mewing, crying,  
baby claws  
scrabbling, slipping,  
swimming,  
drowning.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 11

Herman's a dumb name  
for a savior.  
Skinny, sopping wet,  
dirty glasses & blonde crew cut's  
a dumb look  
for a hero.  
The art building's a dumb place  
to find a home  
for a sodden kitten.  
But it worked.  
It all worked.  
I named it Lazarus.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12

We take the bus 7 miles  
to the movie house in Cambridge Springs.  
They advertise *A-Bomb News Pictures*  
& *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

While Ingrid Bergman fights  
the war before my war  
I finger phrases like “megaton”  
& “radiation poisoning.” Akim Tamirov growls,  
*Don't provoke. Don't provoke.*

MONDAY, AUGUST 13

Lazarus' torturers tell bad fallout jokes.

They fake-shiver & ask,

*Ya feel a little Nip in the air?*

They call after Herman

*Hey, Pussylover*

*How fur ya willin' to go?*

He ignores them.

I ask him how he rescued Lazarus.

*I told them I'd called the Fire Department.*

*Did you?*

*Did I what?*

*Call the Fire Department?*

*Hell, no. What d'ya think I am?*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 14

Now the war, laboring toward surrender  
has crowned and is named.

Betting pools limit the wagers to days  
and hours instead of weeks.

I put twenty-five cents on my birthday:  
9:30 am, August 17<sup>th</sup>.

I am late.

The last day listens its way round the clock,  
heavy with the tedium of waiting.

Ozone's wet copper smell promises lightning  
printing the day on my skin.

The sirens come first. Then shouting.

Fire alarms, honking and insistent,  
empty classrooms into the street.

Car horns challenging church bells.

Numbing, dizzying echoes in the blood.

Sheet lightning walls a crouching sky.

AUGUST 14, LATER

Night falls as the wind rises. Front doors open all along the block, people rushing, crowding, embracing their way to one another. On the arm of a woman I've never seen before, I am dragged onto someone's already crowded porch. A man is handing out bottles of beer, Pabst, my father's favorite. I take one, clink bottles with the woman and chug-a-lug. She suddenly bursts into tears and staggers off the porch to sit weeping on the curb. The beer man watches her, lights a cigarette, stops, mumbles an apology and hands it to me.

I look, without luck, for Herman Lytell. The beer man comes back with a fifth of bourbon and holds it to my lips, obediently I drink until he stops pouring. He puts his arm around my shoulder and leans in, boozy breath exhaling his opinion of my *cute cup cake* breasts. Astonished I thank him.

And run.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15

I am not the only one in the dorm who misses breakfast

I am not the only one in the dorm unable to lift her head

I am not the only one in the dorm with a hangover.

It's a long day.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16

The whole town moves outside.  
Takes its meals in the backyard  
or on blankets in the park.  
Music plays from porch radios  
until sign-off at midnight.  
Announcers report the crowds  
in Times Square, Trafalgar Square,  
Sydney and Peking.  
Rationing ended, there is a line  
at the gas station, at the A&P.  
The Dean holds a picnic.  
On his front lawn: hot dogs,  
corn on the cob, cole slaw, potato salad,  
watermelon, ice cream,  
lemonade and beer.  
The boys from Franklin High  
know that graduation means occupation.  
Their senior class trip may be to Rome  
or Hamburg, Frankfurt or Osaka.  
In Tokyo ash and shadows wait.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 17

I am sixteen at the end of my first war.  
Peace has not closed the college,  
but it might as well have.  
In one way or another  
we are all leaving.

When I'm not in classes I spend the time  
with Herman walking:  
through the campus,  
through the town.  
Just walking.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 18

A humid, heavy, sticky day.  
Clouds hang low and expectant  
My father, come to take me home  
for a weekend birthday celebration,  
carries my duffle. I follow with Lazarus in a milk crate.

Suddenly my dad stops, looks around  
as though someone has just called his name.  
Distant thunder rumbles.  
*It's coming, he says,*  
*We're in for it now.*