

Publication: The Providence Journal; Date: Jul 3, 2016; Section: Nation & World; Page: A17

**MY TURN** CHARLES PINNING

# Words of wisdom after big boom

**M**y father was an explosive guy. He was an underwater weapons expert for the Navy, had a short fuse as a father, and he procured our fireworks when we drove from Newport to Baltimore to visit my grandmother.

Who abandons the cool breezes of Newport in August to drive eight hours south to the suffocating heat and humidity of Baltimore? A man clearly battling with the absurd.

But there were the fireworks. In the early 1960s, the sale of fireworks was legal in Maryland and illegal in Rhode Island and we'd load up. Silver "torpedoes" that exploded on contact when thrown; stacks of red and blue cellophane-packed firecrackers; Roman candles that were my mother's favorite. But most commanding of all, those red orbs the size of jawbreakers with their erect green wicks: the supremely stupefying *really loud* cherry bombs!

"They can blow your damn head off!" declared my father.

Back at home, my father hid away the family arsenal until the Fourth of July. But how could a boy forget about that stash for almost a year until, under his father's strict supervision, they were broken out and shot off in a safe and orderly way?

On a particularly lazy, muggy afternoon approaching the Fourth, I took it upon myself to conduct a little search.

Starting in my father's closet and burrowing deep behind his suits where I often located Christmas

presents I came up empty-handed, so I headed down to the basement. I struck pay dirt behind some big spools of wire in a cabinet beneath his projects counter.

Digging into a box of excelsior, I removed a cherry bomb — just the thing to jolt civilization out of its summer torpor.

Pushing up the screen in the second floor bathroom, I placed the cherry bomb on the window sill. The plan was to light the wick and then flick it out the window with my finger. But when I lit the wick, it started burning down so fast I panicked and jumped into the bathtub.

**KABOOM!**

It sounded like a cannon and blew the entire window out of the frame, showering glass and wood everywhere. My mother came running up the stairs and found me cowering in the bathtub.

"What the hell have you done?" she screamed. "Get out of there! We're not touching anything until your father gets home. What the hell's the matter with you?"

I retreated to my room, disconsolate. My father and I had too long now been victims of each other. I was a kid with lots of energy and he was a controlling dad who at this point (I was 9) had to be tired of punishing me. Something had to change.

Upon his arrival home, I heard muffled words and then my father climbing the stairs and entering the bathroom. I imagined him standing there like Dwight Eisenhower

surveying the damage at Bastogne.

Then he came to my door and opened it.

"Come in here, please."

I followed him into the bathroom. We viewed the destruction and he loosened his tie. He was hot. He was tired. He'd had it, and he made the sound of air being let out of a tire, his gaze searching hard through the shockingly clear non-window. Finally he spoke. The words were like a knot coming out of a rope and the rope letting go.

"It's not the heat," he said thoughtfully, "it's the humditty."

If humditty was a mistake, he wasn't going to correct it. It fit this crazy situation better than anything else. Barely looking at me, he turned and directed himself into his bedroom. We rebuilt the window together, shot off the fireworks on the Fourth, and I don't remember any punishment. He had thrown in the towel, and stopped trying to understand and control everything.

He'd found freedom. By remaking a word into his own, he had declared independence from the tyranny of outward events and established an alliance with the absurdities of life. I've often thought, while confronting so much of what life parades before us, that his words put it perfectly.

"It's not the heat. It's the humditty."

— *Charles Pinning, of Providence, is a novelist and an occasional contributor.*