

Celebrating July 4 with the Lumpkins

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The Fourth of July was death. It didn't begin as death. Maybe the first couple of July 4 parades in Bristol were emotional and inspiring. The big drums of the marching bands resonating in my chest as I sat on the curb. The funny cars, the hideous, glad-handing politicians, the floats. But then it became death.

It was the heat and repetition that wore me down by the time I was 8. Watching marching bands from the Midwest buttoned up in wool, straps tight against their chins and furry bushies growing off their heads like hedgehogs, hefting huge, gleaming tubas. The crush of people. But most of all, it was the heat and humidity. There seemed to be a rule that every Fourth in Bristol had to be suffocating.

We came up from Newport, which was a good 10 degrees cooler than Bristol. Even though Bristol is on the water, it is the Upper Bay, far from the ocean upon which Newport lies.

After the parade, the torture ramped up. Nobody could talk like my Portuguese relatives, except maybe Italians and Jews. Or Greeks. Older people. Nobody can talk like older people.

We trudged up from Hope Street to a triple-decker a few blocks away. My aunts and uncles were there, the women were all dressed in black and wore heavy nylon stockings and the men had mustaches and stubble and drank beer. And they talked. And they talked and they talked and they talked.

Two houses down was a perverted family I was not allowed to talk to. Everyone in my family said they were trash. They were the Lumpkins, and they were from Virginia. I just loved them, and when the ladies in black became a typhoon of talk and the men were appropriately excited about politics or who was double-dipping, I snuck over to see what those Lumpkins were up to, and they didn't disappoint.

Noise was coming from Mr. and Mrs. Lumpkin's bedroom window, and I stood on a rock and looked in. There was Mrs. Lumpkin with a man, but it wasn't Mr. Lumpkin.

Gaye Lumpkin, the 13-year-old daughter, came up behind me chewing on her braids. "Whatcha doin'?" she asked.

Stepping off the rock I said, "Nothing."

"You talk funny," she said. "Are you rich?"

"No," I answered.

"Y'all looking for Shep?" Shep was her brother my age.

"Yeah," I said.

"He went fishin' with Paw, but they all should be back soon."

Three seconds later the blue and white pickup rattled into the driveway and Mr. Lumpkin rolled out and into the house, and next thing you knew, the man in the bedroom with Mrs. Lumpkin came running out in his underwear, and Mr. Lumpkin stood on the cement back steps and threw a baked potato at him that exploded square off the back of that man's head.

Shep slid out of the truck and said, "Hey."

"Hi," I said.

"Y'all hafta go to that dang parade?" Shep asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Me and my Paw went fishin'. We hate that ol' parade."

"Me too," I said.

"Lookit this," he said, sliding a pack of firecrackers out of his pants pocket. "Let's go shoot'm off!"

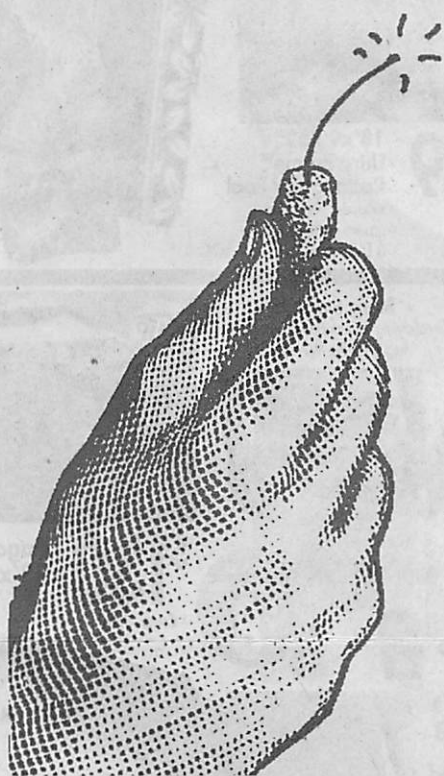
"Okay," I said.

We went around behind the house where a tire on a filthy rope was hanging from a leafless tree. Gaye popped out from behind the tree and curled her finger toward me. I followed her and she lifted her dress. She didn't have any underwear on.

I gawked until I heard Shep say, "C'mon!"

He had the firecrackers out of the pack and unbraided one and handed it to me.

"Okay," he said, "Ya hold it, cock your



arm back, and I'll light it, and soon as I do, you throw it."

"Um . . ."

"Don't be a scaredy cat."

"I'm not. It's just that my father told me never to hold a firecracker and light it. He said you always have to put it on something, then light it."

"Well then, I'll do it," Shep said, and he pinched the firecracker from my fingers. "Here. Light it."

I put the match to it and he tossed it forward where the wick sizzled down and . . .

Nothing.

"A dud," he scowled. "Gimme another one."

Same thing happened.

"Here, let me try," I said, and I held the firecracker between my fingers with my arm cocked. Shep lit the fuse and before you could say Jiminy Cricket, that ol' fuse zipped right down and the thing exploded between my fingers.

"Raaah!" I spun in circles, afraid to look, sure I'd blown off my fingers and ruined my pitching career. There was no sensation down there. Shep flew out of the yard and Gaye stood beside the tree, chewing on her braids.

Sweat pouring off my face, I looked at my hand. Thank God. My fingers were still there, but I couldn't feel anything. I ran back to my aunt and uncle's house, peeled into the backyard where my father took one look at me and knew something terrible had happened.

I started crying and showed him my hand. The fingers were beginning to swell into sausages. He plunged my hand into a galvanized tub of ice water and beers, cursing under his breath, but I could see he was worried, too.

We went to the hospital where they examined my fingers and lightly bandaged them. It took a week for the swelling to go down and the sensation to come back. My father knew I didn't need a lecture.

As an adult, I avoid the Bristol Parade like the plague; except on rare occasions, when I take someone from far away who's never been and feels they must have the experience. At those gruesome times, I stand there sweating, listening to the brass and drums, looking at all the wool and crepe paper and politicians.

Glad for sunglasses and a hat, I braid my fingers together and weep for my childhood and my parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. And for the Lumpkins. All gone. All gone.

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