

Fourth of July

Personal Essay

Fourth of July has always been a huge holiday for me. The explosions leave such a surprised look on your face. I enjoy all of the varieties from one end of the spectrum to the other. There are black snakes that grow out of fire and smoke, and the artillery rounds that launch with an unbelievable force. There is the smoke dancing through the air after the Morning Glory has gone. The next round is highlighted within the smoke filled air. Black powder everywhere!

Then, there is that last one with a broke wick. Do you light it? Is it going to fire right or explode right here? While others debate these types of questions, I am devising a plan to get me a couple of more inches away while lighting it up! A punk, a lighter in the shape of a shot gun, or just a piece of paper lit on fire. Whatever it takes to get this in the air is the only thought going through my mind.

Anyway, I have gotten ahead of myself. As you can tell, I love the Fourth of July. Some people have Christmas, others Thanksgiving, and some Halloween. Summer is in full bloom. The heat of the day is dripping all about. Families are firing up the grill with a traditional American meal of hamburgers and hot dogs. Then there is the anticipation of the evening ahead.

This love of the holiday started when I was growing up in St. Louis as a child. Each year, my family and I would go to the VP Fair in downtown St. Louis. This fair still happens today. Vendors are everywhere cooking, selling, yelling, and hustling about. People are so thick it can be hard to move at times. This all happens under the Arch with the river in the background rushing through the heart of St. Louis.

Then, as the evening starts to approach, everyone begins to settle down. Finding places on the grass with a blanket huddling close to one another. Where is the best spot? It does not matter, as long as the Arch is in view, it will be a good place to settle in. No announcements, no people on a loud speaker, just a huge explosion that shakes you from within. Louder than thunder, a white flash, now the show can begin. The vendors stop cleaning, and hustling about, as the show is about to begin.

From the first shot which is the attention getter, to the colors in the sky, can seem like eternity. The people on the barge will seem to wait long enough to create a doubting thought of the shot being an accident or a mistake. There is a murmur building in the crowd as everyone grows anxious with anticipation. If you are not paying attention, the next shot will be missed. The show is all about creating the surprise factor. Quietly, a trail of sparks makes their way through the night. The plan is sneaking off into the air without a sound. Then an explosion that rattles the first! A huge spectrum of color as it grows in an attempt to touch the ground. You cannot help but lean back as the colors in the sky reach out to say they are here. From the silence with the explosion comes a growing roar of the crowd. Cheering and hollering as the show has begun.

The show lasts about 30 minutes filling the sky with all sorts of colors. There are explosions that rattle your bones and create a shudder from the inside out. Multiple shots are rapidly firing one after another go off in the air. Then there is a slight pause from all of the glory. Then, there are more shots going off one after another, then the whole show started with. Five minutes of spectacular colors stacking on top of each other.

My eyes have been fixed on the sky so long I feel I cannot move my head. A smile as if I am the joker creating the show. A true giddy feeling as each explosion shakes my skinny little body. To tear me away would be torture and cruel. After the massive finally everyone else realizes the show is over and is moving on, I feel they could shoot one last shot. My parents know what I do not want to accept, the fact that the show is over. Thoughts of what I have just witnessed dance through my head as we make the trudging act of hiking to our car. It is parked miles away and it seems everyone else parked their car in the same lot as us. Eventually the crowd dissipates into the night. I drift off to sleep in the backseat from the lull of the engine dreaming of the colors and fire in the sky.

My first experience with the VP Fair was when I was eight years old. I saw many little shows that families put on in a field or back yard, but had no idea just how big fireworks could be. The crowds and the way that people moved throughout the day, my eyes never stopped moving back and forth from one thing to another. A theatre show and everyone was involved. Each vendor struggles to get your attention to sell their trinkets that they have carried out in the open. I want to stop and see

them all, until I feel a hand grasp mine to pull my attention forward to the next person.

Another July 4th that was kind of special was one in which we spent at home. I was a little older so I had begun to participate in lighting fireworks. I learned a different aspect of the specialties that fireworks could create. My family never spent life as part of the mainstream, so this was not an unexpected event. There was a two other couples that had come over that day. Food and activities were going on throughout the day. Two of my friends had come over as well.

As the evening had begun to settle down, the rules were explained to all who were willing to play. On the picnic table was thousands of bottle rockets laid out. We each had those old fashioned glass coke bottles. At that time, the plastic ones were not out. We were each given a large amount of rockets and told that once we run out it would be a mad dash to the table. The only rule was not to shoot at someone who said they give up.

After the rules had been explained we all scattered about the three acre yard. A roman candle was lit in the middle of the yard and when the fireballs were gone, the war could begin. It was total chaos with little missiles whizzing by everywhere! No safety equipment, not even gloves for the firing hand. Just grin and bear it or don't play. It was an experience of a lifetime and one that will never be repeated for all of the reasons most sane people can guess. Luckily, the injuries were very minor, and none required a hospital with a lot of stuttering about what really happened.

As I have grown into adulthood, fireworks have always been part of my summer life. An excitement builds inside me as I watch the tents grow in the parking lots all around me. I want to stop at them all to see if one has something different from the others. Who has the best deal for the biggest explosion? I am not looking for the bottle rockets and firecrackers, but the big boxes of artillery rounds. All of the boxes give no true hint to their glory as all of the labels state they emit showers of sparks and explosions. My thought is if they didn't do at least that, then they should not be under the tent! Oh, to dream about owning my own tent, these owners get a preview of the newest and best explosions money can buy!

Over the past couple of years, I have become the master of ceremonies with my older boys as my assistants. Buying the show is part of the excitement, but as the evening fades into darkness, all of the preparations are done, and the show is

about to begin. My wife does not do fire and explosions, so she floats in the pool with our daughters waiting for the show. Sometimes there is that last dash to the fireworks stand one last time hoping for a few extra rounds on sale.

The day begins simple enough with starting the food preparations. A watermelon cut into a basket and then filled with fruit. We place it in the freeze to frost the fruit over, for a fun cold snack on a hot day. Around 10 am the grill is lit and pans of beer with several different types of brautsworse are place in. These will cook for several hours in the beer and then grilled to lock in the flavors. Hot dogs and hamburgers are made for the others who want options. This is my way of actually relaxing controlling the grill and getting everything flowing. I want people to enjoy themselves while I take care of everything around me. My boys have caught on to this and have begun to help where they can.

Food and good company or just our family, we make the best of the situation. I have had many people over or we orchestrate a simple party with just the family. Either way, it is all about family and fireworks. Flags are flying high as our independence is celebrated everywhere. Even my tiki torches are red, white, and blue!

Each year, we carefully open all of the packages in advance so there is a flow to the colors in the sky. A sheet of plywood with the launching tubes screwed to the wood to keep everything firing upwards into the night. We buy extra lighters with a new bottle of butane, as I have no items that would light with a punk. Loading and twisting wicks together to simultaneously fire rounds into the air creates this giddy sensation amongst us men.

My two daughters and wife are in the pool waiting for the show to begin. The sun slips out of sight so the show can begin. Shortly after the first explosions in the sky, our neighbors stop with their tracers and roman candles and set up lawn chairs to watch the show. A trail of fire and smoke lingers through the air. Fire is wafting while the smoke dances into the night. Linger high above our heads is a layer of smoke filled with a scent of black powder.

We rush up to the tubes still smoking from the last launch. Delicately, we drop the next set of artillery rounds into the tubes. Smoke bellows out of each tube, as the cardboard is heated again and again. Quickly twisting the wicks together, we wait for the other to complete these same tasks. Then, without saying a word, my boys and I light the next set of rounds, and

scurry back watching the wicks burn into the tubes. Eight shots shoot high into the sky. The sparks create an amber light glistening, a small white flash, the colors everywhere reaching down towards us. Ohh, ahhh is all we hear as the colors change from blues, greens, yellows, reds, and many others. Each explosion is a little different, but they all create the same type of sensation.

Between my sons and I there is a bond so strong that none of us need to say a thing. We seem to just have a primal understanding of one another. Our movements are swift and to the point. Only grunts and pointing upward as things explode into a ball of color. The ballet continues for several hours, and if a tube breaks a drill and screws seem to magically appear to replace it. Even then there is a silence or a grunt as the objects are passed to one another. This is a seamless play that has been prepared for and now executed with precision. We are the actors but the show is above us, with everyone else as the audience. This is our time to shine.

My family is very important to me, and this holiday is a special time during the summer for me and my family. It is wonderful to see us all working together and getting along. The summertime air fills me with excitement about the next show while hanging with my family.