

# Fireworks

*or*

## The Great Rebellion of 1976

I suppose in most families of two or more children, there is one who tends to march to the beat of a different drum than the others. In my family I was the odd duck, the one who was destined to live life against the grain; and I began to realise this at an early age.

My parents did a competent job raising their children, and I have no doubt they did their best according to their lights; but it was done on entirely conventional lines. They were practical, no-nonsense people, firmly grounded in the daily routine of work and chores, and rarely looking beyond the boundaries of their own back yard.

But I was an absent-minded daydreamer, a doodler and a scribbler, forever seeking new vistas of imagination to explore. I slowly became aware that my parents and I viewed life through different lenses: I found little of interest in their prosaic workaday world, and they dismissed my flights of fancy as unproductive and frivolous.

We were living at cross-purposes, and this gradually formed a gulf between us. Clashes of will were inevitable as I grew older, but I was too timid and tongue-tied to be effective in direct confrontation. My only recourse was to follow the Muses and Sirens as they called to me; and then brace myself for the subsequent fallout of parental misunderstanding and disapproval.

The first shot fired in my personal war for independence was a notable one. It was 1976 and the USA was celebrating its Bicentennial. The turmoil and unrest of recent years—Vietnam, Watergate, protests and riots, terrorists, oil embargoes—meant nothing to me. I doubt I was even aware of such things.

But it left America desperate for something positive to cheer about; and the country went all out in throwing a patriotic party from sea to shining sea. Old Glory waved proudly from every flag pole. Even the local fire hydrants were painted a bright red, white and blue.

I got caught up in the excitement of it all, and was filled with patriotic pride for my country. I immersed myself in the lore of the Founding Fathers, Continental Congress, and “Johnny Tremain.”

The spirit of the Revolution was strong within me: I rode with Paul Revere and crossed the Delaware with Washington; visions of Lexington Green and Bunker Hill danced in my head.

My cousin K. came to stay overnight a couple of days before the 4th of July, and we decided to demonstrate our patriotic spirit by building a Bicentennial float. We scrounged around a neighbor’s junk pile and dug up a few decorative wooden porch moldings.

These and some other doodads were nailed to an apple crate; a pair of 2x4 planks served as carrying handles. We painted the odd-looking contraption red, white and blue, stuck a couple of miniature American flags on top, and declared our “float” finished.

Now we needed a parade. It being only July 2nd, there were no parades to be had nearby, so we made our

own. We carried our float down the driveway and walked it a few times up and down a 100 yard section of West Somerset Road.

There was nothing along that stretch but trees and empty fields, so our only audience consisted of two or three cars that passed by, the occupants giving us quizzical looks from their side windows. Nevertheless, we felt proud that we had contributed to our country's birthday party.

Cousin K. went home to celebrate Independence Day with his own family, happy in the satisfaction of a job well done. But I wanted more. I wanted to really see and feel the excitement of the Bicentennial. I wanted fireworks.

I knew my Ransomville cousins were going to the big 4th of July fireworks show in Niagara Falls, and I yearned to join them. On the morning of the 4th I asked my parents if we could go also.

A flat "No" was the answer. No reason, no excuse, just "No."

I was disappointed and angry. I couldn't believe that we weren't going to do anything to celebrate the glorious Fourth, this year of all years.

I brooded upon this injustice all day. Shortly after lunch my parents' friends Bob and Bonnie came over, and the four adults took their usual places around the dining room table to chat the afternoon away. But I prowled restlessly through the house, staring out of windows, going outside and back in, bored and unhappy.

By mid afternoon I was fed up with my stick-in-the-mud parents. It might be fine for them to sit around all day drinking coffee and yucking it up with their friends, but why should I have to suffer? This was the Fourth of July! It was Independence Day!

I couldn't just let it go to waste. What would John Adams think of me? What would John Hancock think?

I've never been prone to sudden brainwaves, but on this day I had a flash of inspiration. An audacious plan popped into my head. I didn't waste any time thinking about probable consequences, but put my scheme immediately into action.

With studied nonchalance I strolled into the dining room and casually announced that I was off for a bicycle ride. A disinterested "Okay" from the table was all the parental approval I required. I got on my little 20-inch bike with the wobbly wheels and began pedaling to my cousins' house . . . 15 miles away.

Keep in mind that I was ten years old and had never biked more than a couple of miles from home before. It was a long and lonely ride.

At first I was filled with the zeal and excitement of my daring deed; but as the miles slowly rolled by doubts and misgivings began to creep in. The landmarks that had flashed by so quickly when riding in the car now crawled past me with agonizing slowness.

At one point along Wilson-Burt Road I saw a small boy running around his yard, waving a sparkler and whooping happily while his smiling father looked on. A great sadness descended upon me. It was as if I was viewing a scene from my own early life that was now gone and lost forever.

Though the boy was only a few years younger than me, I somehow felt that never again would I be so young and happy as that. Perhaps at this moment, at the grand old age of ten, I first became aware of the fleeting innocence of childhood and the melancholy of life.

The late afternoon sun began to sink, and I felt an apprehension that I had taken on more than I could handle. I wasn't afraid, but I felt very much alone. And I knew that it was too late now to turn back.

I pedaled doggedly onward, through the village of Wilson and on into the sunset. The shadows were lengthening and my legs were growing tired.

At long last my destination came slowly into sight. The cousins and my grandparents lived next door to each other, so I pulled wearily into my grandparents' driveway. They were sitting in their yard and had spotted me coming, "a strange boy weaving all over the highway," as my grandmother later told it in her colorful way.

My arrival caused a sensation. Aunt, uncle and cousins all came trooping across the lawn to gaze upon me and hear my tale in wonder and astonishment. I had ridden all the way from Appleton? Alone? They were awestruck.

The plan that I would accompany them to the fireworks show was approved with delight by the cousins. But my parents had to be informed of my whereabouts, so my uncle phoned home and talked to my father. From outside the back door I could hear his side of the conversation:

"Ray! Yeah, it's Chet. Listen, do you know where Scott is? . . . Out bike riding somewhere, huh? Well, right now he's standing on my patio."

There was a dramatic pause while this bombshell sunk in on the other end of the line. My uncle then suggested letting me stay overnight and he'd drive me home the next day, an idea my father seemed agreeable to. But my mother was having none of it. She could be heard loud and clear in the background, blowing her top:

"He's not getting away with it!"

So my parents came to spoil everything and drag me back home. While I waited for them to arrive I began to wonder about the exact nature of my crime. I had told my parents I was going for a bike ride; and I went for a bike ride.

And at the time of my uncle's call they didn't seem the least concerned about where I was. As far as they knew I was still tooling around somewhere out there in the twilight.

But the revelation that I had ridden 15 miles to my cousins' house without their knowledge suddenly made me guilty of a major offense. I had defied them somehow.

At length our car pulled into the driveway, and I came forth to stand trial. After I was suitably denounced and informed that this latest stunt just had to be the most irresponsible thing I'd ever done, it was time to pronounce judgement. To my surprise I was invited to choose my own sentence.

“What do you think we should do to punish you?”

Well, this oughta be easy enough. How about: Let me go to the fireworks, and give me five dollars for candy and pop.

But on second thought that might be pushing things too far. I contemplated a moment, then suggested:

“Ummm . . . take my bike away for a week?”

“A week! We’re taking it away for the rest of the summer! You are not to touch it again until school starts in September. Now go put it in the car.”

“You just said not to touch it.”

“You put that bike in the car this minute, and don’t you get smart with me! And come back here when you’re done. We’re not through with you yet.”

I hoisted my bike into the back of our station wagon and returned to the cluster of parents and assorted relatives. This should have been the end of the drama, but my mother had to get in one last shot.

“You know, we were going to surprise you by going to the fireworks tonight, but you can just forget about that now.”

I couldn’t believe a word of this. I had never known my parents to plan a surprise for anyone. A quick glance at my father, standing silent and embarrassed in the background, confirmed my suspicion. It was a fabrication, made up on the spot to increase my burden of guilt.

This was a flagrant violation of the rules of engagement. In the ongoing and age-long battle of wills between parents and children it is understood that the parents have all the power and authority.

They can do anything they like. They can chivvy their kids around willy-nilly and issue orders as they see fit, with no more than a simple “Because I said so” as a reason.

But it is also understood that the children, with limited options available to them, are allowed to utilize the arts of deception and subterfuge. They are permitted to build their own secret “kids only” world, to hide things from the grownups, and to invent tales to cover their misdeeds.

The task of the parents is to try and detect the truth from the fib. This is all part of the game.

But for a parent to increase an already unfair advantage by using the kids’ own weapons against them: this was a betrayal of the code of warfare. It was cheating and just plain wrong.

My mother had crossed this line, and the effect it had on me was remarkable. In an instant I went from a guilt-ridden criminal to something akin to a martyr for the cause. I felt that my rebellion was entirely justified.

Outwardly I maintained my contrite and hang-dog expression; inwardly I was triumphant. I didn't know yet that we were at war, but I knew I had won this battle.

The fact that I myself had not been entirely honest when I first announced my bike ride was, in my estimation, excusable. I knew my parents would not give me permission, so I neatly omitted a fact or two. I was "playing the game."

So, in the end I was hauled home in disgrace and lost my bike for the summer; but it was a price worth paying. I had struck a blow against parental tyranny and unreasonable oppression. I had made the first step in the long struggle to be my own person and follow my own path.

There would be future clashes, but this one had the most significance. Maybe the fireworks of the evening were not the ones I had hoped for; but in the end it was a memorable Fourth of July after all.

In my own small way I felt an affinity with the heroes of the Revolution: the Sons of Liberty, Patrick Henry, and those boys who stood their ground on Lexington Green. I felt I could take my place among them without shame. I felt like an American.

And in the year that I wrote this piece I attended TWO Independence Day fireworks displays.