

Sparklers
by Dynn Javier

Sparklers are now banned in the entire county. The local jurisdiction has been trying to bypass the laws so that they could allow nearby vendors to continue selling them by means of a special holiday permit linked to Independence Day. But there hasn't been much luck. No one really seemed to mind. About the ban, that is. All of the best fireworks were already banned and had been for a long time. And it's not like banning them—or the sparklers—really did anything anyway.

“It's so stupid,” James said. “Banning sparklers. It seems to me that they're just trying to upset the kids. Everyone loves sparklers. I love sparklers.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. James was right. We all loved sparklers all the same. I sat up and brushed the grass off the back of my head and neck.

James, still laying down, said, “Like I know Uncle Rob is still gonna have them, but why do they have to make it so,” he searched for the right word, “difficult.”

That's what James used to get called as a child. Difficult. He always made a big fuss when he didn't get what he wanted. Mom used to give him hell for it. I think everyone is at least sort of like that when they're young though. I was too. There's nothing wrong with it.

Below the hill where we were sitting and laying, there were two kids down in the street. They looked old enough to play with fireworks and not young enough to only care about sparklers. So they had little bottles and some bottle rockets to go with them. Probably other stuff, too. They were still much younger than James or me. Maybe middle school. Either way, they were trying to soak up the last moments of dusk before the sun went home.

I watched them while letting James rest his head in the grass. One of them had black curly hair and a nice leather jacket. It was too nice of a jacket to be made to fit a kid. At first I

thought it was sad, because the jacket wasn't gonna fit him in two or three years when he's older. But he probably loved that jacket anyway. And he could always get a new one that fit. I kept watching. He squatted down with two empty bottles in the middle of the street and started fitting them with rockets like a florist organizing a bouquet.

The other kid had his hair cut really short. I think it was a crew cut just to keep his head cool during the summer. He was wearing a hoodie that he looked really comfortable in and some jeans and dirty sneakers. Crew Cut started creeping up on Jacket Boy from behind and I noticed him pull out something from his front pocket. It looked like sand. At this point I almost didn't realize how intently I was watching them, but I could detect the bang snaps in his little crooked hands. Jacket Boy was still tending to his flowers, fluffing some petals and tying some fuse bows. I waited.

"Shit!" yelled the boy, falling on his hands and backside. The other boy laughed and walked past him. The fallen one lashed out, "What was that for?"

"You need to be more aware of your surroundings, Caleb."

"Shut up, Marvin," he said, standing up now dusting his hands off.

"Etta, what was that?" James asked me, pulling me back to our own present scene on the hill.

"Just some kids playing with fireworks," I said without much thought. Then, returning my gaze downhill to the two boys, now murmuring, gathered around the two bottles. They were now blooming at the neck and expertly decorated with painstaking detail. I could see the special care being given to every angle and each individual fuse, delicately knotted until their fingers looked like they were coated with pencil lead. I could feel it under their finger nails, even though

I was quite a distance away still, up the hill. The fragile work took all their focus, and they started to talk even more quietly so that it got harder for me to hear them.

“Sparklers?” James asked without moving from the grass. Now I could hear small bits and pieces.

“No, bottle rockets,” I said, equally motionless. “And bang snaps.”

“Oh, you mean poppers.” *No make this one face this way. ... Nu-uh! ... It'll look sicker like this.* The boys went on.

Something about *bottle rockets are so cool* Caleb said. And how *my dad gets a bunch of super huge ones, you know, from out of the state* said Marvin. *Aren't those banned, too?* James could probably hear them, but I was struggling to put phrases together by reading their lips or watching their elbows and shoulders dip and hunch. And nowadays James usually liked to figure things out for himself. *I think that these skinnier ones make a cooler noise.*

“I think Uncle Rob calls ‘em bangers,” I said, talking about fireworks.

“Yeah, what a freak,” James smiled. *Make sure they're all facing the right side up.*

“They say ‘Pop-Its’ on the box,” I said.

“Yeah, but no one calls soda ‘pop’ where we’re from.” *Hey, be careful.*

“You’re right,” I said. Now Caleb and Marvin were trying to find a rock to lean one of their phones on. I think they wanted to record their flowers. *Do you have the matches?* I was soon watching them with all of my attention again.

“I wonder if sparklers are banned wherever ‘pop’ is sold,” James said incredulously. *I found this lighter at the barbeque.*

Marvin then pulled out a long candle lighter from his front pocket. It was the kind that you lit a birthday cake with. Maybe it was because James and I were so far away but it looked

really long in his short little arm, almost comically long. It was like I was watching a silent cartoon. The boy lifted the point into the sky and I saw him mouth something to himself I but couldn't hear. The breeze was too loud.

"His magic wand?" James snickered, ruffling his hair in the grass. "Couldn't the little snot come up with something cooler to say?" His hearing always surprised me to this day.

Caleb had given up looking for a rock and just lumped his jacket up so that his phone could rest on the leather mound it made on the asphalt. I couldn't tell if this meant that he really loved the jacket or if he was a stupid kid who didn't really care. He squatted over again, fidgeting with his phone trying to get the angle just right. Marvin crouched beside the two vases, hilariously holding his weapon of choice with both hands. James said nothing.

"Okay! It's ready!" yelled the jacketless boy, now several yards away. He gave the brown lump one last tap on the phone side.

"Three! Two!" yelled the other boy. His chest and shoulders heaved at each count as he took in a big deep breath. I couldn't stop staring at him. "One!"

Marvin's dusty fingers clenched on his plastic torch and one little spark peeked out like a feather. The tiny flame looked as small as a star burning out in the night sky from where I was sitting, galaxies away. But that spark suddenly latched onto a bundle of fuses the two boys had cradled down on the street and, as quickly as the little light zipped and zig zagged across the line, Marvin made his way behind a nearby bush and bunkered down next to Caleb. We were all watching intently, except James.

And then it happened.

The two boys were talking so fast that it seemed like there were more than just two boys there, making all that noise, getting as excited as them. It was like a whole block party condensed

onto one street corner. *Oh my gosh!* But weirdly their voices seemed so quiet even now. My hearing was not nearly as good as James' but still, I knew it wasn't that bad. Everything seemed contained, like how flames bounced around in the bottles and then vanished like they were never there. They didn't leave much aside from some ash and some black marks on the glass. *Oh my gosh!* Small patches of scorched asphalt were still steamy. James stomach slowly rose and fell with each calm breath. I wondered if he could even smell the sulphur. The kids were still yelling at each other.

Oh man!

Check the film!

Did you see that?

Wow!

"That was pretty loud for bottle rockets," said James. I stayed quiet for a short while afterward. Mostly, it was just to test and see how loud it really was, because even with the two kids yelling and screaming it still felt really, really quiet up on the hill now. All I could hear was the breeze again. Like we were resting in a different container, James and I. Those bottle rockets from out of state were definitely banned in this county. They had to of been for a while. *Oh my gosh!*

"It's getting dark," I finally said. But there were plenty of pink clouds left in the sky. The sun always set really late in the summer. "We should go back."

"For Uncle Rob's burgers? Or for the sparklers?"

"For some cigarettes. Let's stop at a gas station first." I was looking down at James now. He was still facing up at the sky.

“Yeah,” he said. “That sounds good.” I think he still was hoping for the clouds to grow or for the sun to leave him a present or for the boys to say something interesting, but eventually he sat up too.

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“Etta, when do you think you started smoking?” he asked me as I parked the car.

“In high school, I think.”

“Really?” he said. “I thought I remembered you smoking in the 8th grade.” I shut my door and so did he.

“Maybe. I can’t remember it that well.”

“High school was fun though.”

“Yeah it was.” We started walking down the street toward Uncle Rob’s house. I opened my pack and pulled a fresh cigarette out from my back pocket. James kept close to me minding the direction of the smoke and how the smell got carried by the wind. Back at the gas station James asked if there were any good looking bananas at the cash register, so I got him one with just a touch of green at the tip. That’s how he liked them.

Sometimes James can feel a banana out. He can always tell a really ripe one. Those are easy. He can probably sniff those out if they’re really brown like anyone else can. But a banana that’s somewhere between really green and only kinda green, he can grope the peel and take a guess at how ripe it is. Most of the time he’s pretty close. The problem is if he chooses wrong, unpeels the banana, and takes a bite it’s too late. You can’t unpeel a banana. Or is that what it’s

called in the first place? The point is that it only goes one way. James likes bananas anyway, but he prefers the ones with just barely a touch of green, though.

“Dya think Uncle Rob’s gonna try and pull some crazy shit again this year?” he said, halfway through his banana.

“I thought he got a new girlfriend since then? At least that’s what mom told me,” I said with a puff.

“He’s getting desperate.”

“He’s getting old,” I puffed again, this time with some sympathy.

“My point exactly,” James said. He finished his banana in a couple more bites and handed me the peel while we were still walking. I tossed in into a trashcan a couple houses down.

“One day we’ll be just like him,” James continued. “Ripping it up at nice family barbeques and buying illegal fireworks for our nice nieces and nephews to play with after it gets dark.”

“Well when you put it that way it doesn’t sound so bad.”

“My point exactly,” he said stretching out each word. He shoved his hands into his pockets, satisfied. I should have gotten him two or three more bananas.

We were getting close to Uncle Rob’s house now. All of the streets in the neighborhood had been cut off for the holiday so I had to park the car out a few blocks away. It was still nice out though with a calm heat persisting into the night. There were plenty of kids playing in the street and in their yards. And it was actually getting dark out now. The coolers and red plastic tubs were sweating off ice water into the thirsty grass underneath. Older folk huddled around grills and picnic tables. I was positive mom had told me Uncle Rob had a new girlfriend now.

James did have a better memory mine. Mine wasn't horrible, though, but his was much better. He got it from mom.

I mostly remember bad things, I thought. Like when James first came back from the hospital with all those bandages wrapped around his face. He couldn't stick his hands in his pockets then, he kept walking around with his hands outstretched. I would be scared, too. Like how all the dogs in the neighborhood are scared right now. They're all probably quivering inside with their tails all curled up or tucked between their legs. Maybe that's another reason why they keep banning fireworks, for the dogs who can't stand them.

I caught myself watching again, this time it was all of the kids in the neighborhood running around with more bottle rockets and firecrackers and roman candles. A few of them even hovered around old mortars that people like Uncle Rob bought. They fired them off one by one and then let them rest on the curb while the air thickened with smoke and haze and charcoal. Then I started to watch my feet because I noticed tin cans filled with water lining the sidewalk. A lot of them had used sparklers in them. Their tails poked out like paintbrushes and the stems made the water in the cans the most beautiful color black. The water looked like fish scales, with purple and green swirls lost in the reflection. Like an ashtray for the fire the stars make. I got lost inside.

Then James accidentally kicked one over.

"What was that?" he asked, immediately stopping.

"Oh. Nothing. It was just a tin can."

"Oh, okay," he said. James was startled. He didn't like how he still knocked things over or bumped into things sometimes. It was the only time when he really showed it. I put my hand on his back where his neck met the base of his shoulders and guided him along.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, easing him forward back into the inertia of in a straight line down the pavement. After a few steps I took my hand back and let him go. It reminded me of when mom taught James and I how to ride our bikes. When you’re too old and too skilled for training wheels but need a push from mom and then you pedal away without looking back, hands free. Back in the *difficult* days, I remembered with one last fond puff of smoke. The menthol capsule left a bittersweet lump of haze in my throat. I looked back at the can, though.

The milky black water seeped into the sidewalk and further down into the grass. The sparklers, wilted, just laid there. At that point I remembered to put out my cigarette and stomp it out somewhere where one of the kids wouldn’t pick it up. Another bad thing, mostly. There was no way mom would sniff it on me with all the barbeque and fireworks going on all night anyway.

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“James! Etta!” Now, how have you two been?” Uncle Rob greeted us loudly when we walked into his backyard. He was brandishing a big pair of tongs at us. He had a nice big apron on, messy and stained from the long day of grilling he’s probably had. His head was clean shaven, but his mustache-goatee combo had become a salt and pepper combination with more salt than pepper than I last remember. “Are you hungry? Come on down and eat! Eat!”

James said yes and I said no, so Uncle Rob put the tongs down and got started right away and making us two fat plates of food. I was so curious about Uncle Rob’s girlfriend but it would have been rude to ask. But I only saw other familiar parents and their kids in small roving networks of hamburger buns and scrapped knees. Everyone looked happy.

He sat us down and by that point I just had to ask.

“Uncle Rob, do you have any sparklers?”

“What? Oh yeah after you polish off those hot links, I got mortars, roman candles, all this great stuff! And more, smoke bombs—”

“Sparklers,” I interrupted him. James was already following his nose over my plate. I hadn’t touched it. He didn’t look up.

“Why, sure, I think so,” he said with a perplexed look in his mustache. “We should have some around here somewhere,” he said, flipping burgers on the grill across the table where we sat. “The kids have been going crazy with them. They keep waving them around like magic wands making letters and circles and taking pictures with their phones.”

“Uncle Rob, do you have a new girlfriend? Is she here?” James chimed in, speaking with a mouthful of food.

“James, boy!” Uncle Rob laughed dropping another hot link on James’ empty plate. “Uncle Rob is back on the market I’m afraid. And it’s a good thing, too, the new-old lady wasn’t a sight for sore ones, boy.” Uncle Rob softened and let his tongs down. James had already vacuumed the fresh link off his plate. “James,” Uncle Rob was almost whispering now.

“Yeah?” he said back. Now I was the silent one. Uncle Rob pulled his phone out of the deep front pocket of his apron and brought it right up to James’ face.

“A r-real horse face, right?” he said nervously, flicking through pictures of some woman with one finger. James smiled back blankly. He kept flicking until the woman on the screen became someone else, and then became someone else again.

“I bet she was, Uncle Rob,” he said kindly.

“Well kid how about these? These were taken just today, all those kids spelling their names with sparklers.” I was impressed that Uncle Rob even knew how to turn up the brightness

on his phone, which was now mere inches from nudging James' nose. But I was still gripping the bench nervously, feeling for dirt and pencil lead under my nails. I looked at the phone, too, seeing each overexposed memory pass the both of us by. Uncle Rob's finger flicked and flicked.

Each time his fingertip swiped across the screen a smiling child with arms outstretched would fly by. They had sparklers in their hands, sometimes holding one in each hand, twirling them in front of the camera such that the flash captured the ray of light left behind by their magic wands. Big, bright flaming smiles. Like alphabet soup from the stars.

And then I saw one more picture after the next consecutive flick of Uncle Rob's old hands. There were two boys, one clad in a nice leather jacket and the other had short hair. They were both waving sparklers around.

"That's nice. It's a little bright," James said. I could see the reflection of the sparks in his glossy stare.

Uncle Rob and I both let out a quiet, happy sigh. His mustache drooped down with solemn satisfaction. He put his phone back in his pocket. Then, after what seems like a long moment of silence, James asked Uncle Rob for another plate of food, so I used my forearm to slide mine under his chin and the paper plate made a nice scratching noise on the wood table.

"Thanks, Etta," he said taking in a deep breath with his nose.

"You're welcome, James," I said before he dug in.

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"Didn't you hear dear? Sparklers are banned in the entire county," said mom when I asked. "They've become a real hassle to find I'm afraid."

“I was just—”

“Etta, is something upsetting you dear?”

I told her no and after some light conversation she went back to talk to Uncle Rob about setting up the rest of the big mortars for the finale. He had traded his chef hat and apron for a welder’s mask and some industrial strength leather gloves and could be seen sauntering around the street as if he just escaped a bomb shelter. James and I sat down on a curb in front of the house with the kids and everyone else.

“Crazy how a stupid rule can make it so difficult to find some sparklers. They probably had some but the kids must have used them all, but that’s okay.” James said. “Kids love sparklers.”

“Yeah, they do,” I said. All fireworks should be banned in all counties. They’re too dangerous. Bad things can happen. Except sparklers, they shouldn’t be banned. I remembered the can full of dead ones that James accidentally kicked over earlier, but I didn’t have the nerve to tell him. I don’t think it would have made him upset, anyway. I didn’t say anything just to protect myself. It was just an accident.

James faced up listening for the mortars to burst and for the kids to coo and scream. Uncle Rob lived in a cul-de-sac, anyway, so it was easy for him to look like he was looking in the right direction. Sometimes I wondered what it was like. I hoped it wasn’t pitch black most of the time. I liked to think it was like the black water in those tin cans, with pretty scales of purple and green to watch. He was probably used to it by now. Or maybe some light got through to him on Uncle Rob’s phone.

Etta, when do you think I can take the bandages off?

In a few days, I think.

I thought that if I could just find a sparkler and hand it to him he might see something more. Because as loud and as bright as the mortars and the rockets are, you can't see them after what happened to James. At least without getting hurt again, that is.

Really?

That's what the doctor said.

But if I just had a sparkler I could hand it to him and he could hold onto it like a torch. Or more so like a dandelion. And afterward I would light it he could watch it, hold it right up above his face. And then it might be like before. Like when we were kids too watching the little sparklers fly away in the breeze. Most of all I just don't want him to sit around in the dark. But sparklers are banned in the entire county. Any of the sparklers that were brought to this party were already used by the kids who lived in town. The fuel was all ash. The metal tails were bent and twisted. Mortars kept going off in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Buckets of thorns. James kept his head up, calm as ever. And then my mom came up to us and asked me where we were before we got here.

"We were on the hill," I said. "Watching some bottle rockets. And some snap-its. And some bang-poppers. And sparklers."