

I don't remember America dropping the Bomb, of course, because as I said I was just a baby at my mother's breast. But I've lived my whole life in its thick and sticky shadow, and I grew up on the noble story of this most excellent and worthy A-bomb: A for American; A for Atomic; A for Amnesia. I was born into an orgy of explosions.

The Russians stole the secret of the Bomb from us just before I went to kindergarten, and I learned then that the whole world could

blow up at any moment. My first-grade teacher, Miss Loving, taught us that wherever we were—at home with our families, on a picnic, or right here in our classroom—we should stay alert to the possibility of a nuclear attack. It could come at any time. Once, as a group of us boys wrestled across the playground, Miss Loving reprimanded us for being too rowdy, adding that we weren't in any position to respond properly to a nuclear attack. We all knew the response by now: Duck! And cover! Whenever we saw the bright flash, wherever we were, we were supposed to drop everything, duck and cover. Under our desks, beneath a beach towel, below our beds—the key was to close our eyes, cover our heads, and wait for the blast to pass over us. And then, when it was all over, Miss Loving told us, we should always wash thoroughly.

I knew what supplies we were supposed to keep in our basements—tuna, dry fruit, evaporated milk, canned chicken, tomato juice—and I was a little bothered about why Mom frowned and said not to worry, we didn't need it. In Cub Scouts we were taught to encourage everyone in our neighborhood to stock up, so that those of us who were prepared wouldn't be in the uncomfortable position of denying canned chicken to our less responsible neighbors, but Mom wouldn't budge. I kept quiet on the subject at Cub Scout meetings. That was OK, because it wasn't long before Dad and I went to an award ceremony and heard a man from the national Cub Scouts tell a confusing story about a boy from Boise, Idaho, who had found out that his parents were soft on the Russians and that the boy had turned them in to the police—I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing—and Dad said I couldn't go to Cub Scout meetings anymore. I was baffled.

When I was young, five or six and for years after, we went with friends to their grandparents' farm in nearby Woodstock, Illinois, for the Fourth of July. Glanmuzzie, her eyes twinkling, her long hair wrapped into a bun, made fresh lemonade from scratch, and served us homemade rhubarb pie right out of the oven. She shook her head

and clucked disapprovingly, her jowls shaking, as Paw Paw reached a long, sinewy arm into his huge duffel bag filled with the highly prized illicit goods—we each got tiny glowing punks to light the little crackling bombs, a handful of sparklers, some buzzers and thumpers, and long packages of sweet firecrackers with their fuses woven together. We pulled them off the braid individually and pop! pop! pop! most of the morning until my big brother fashioned a way to hang the whole load to a tree and light the bottom fuse—a sudden dance of fire and smoke unraveled just beneath the branch, a chaos of deafening charges, the exciting smell of gunpowder everywhere, and Paw Paw, inspired, drooled slightly and laughed out loud as he adjusted his hearing aid. He looked a lot like Harry Truman, but taller and a little stooped.

Paw Paw gave us a cherished Big One only now and then, and only if we begged a little. A Big One was treasured because it was rare and because it was huge and because it made a concussion that rattled the windows in the farmhouse and made a thunderous impact that shook Glanmuzzie to her toes. That excited Paw Paw every time. But we were only worthy of a Big One if we could walk a fine line, demonstrating proper awe and reverence, but never slipping into groveling or whimpering. Stop your bellyaching, said Paw Paw sternly if more than two of us approached at once. Stop your whining. We had to demonstrate our courage in the asking, I suppose, or we were unlikely to have the required courage in the bombing. Look a man in the eye when you make a request, Paw Paw instructed. Stand up straight, and don't mince your words.

My older brother was a bomb thrower. Big Ones are cool, he said forcefully, displaying his competence and, again, his power. When he held a lit M-80 in his hand—the casing said DO NOT HOLD IN HAND, DO NOT HOLD IN HAND over and over—and heaved it into the middle of the pond, a waterspout leapt into the air high above the trees. Minutes later, little lifeless goldfish bodies floated to the surface. When he put a cherry bomb under a can away from the house, shrapnel whizzed past us into the woods. He was the absolute master of the Big One.

We drove home in time to see the giant fireworks display over Lake Ellyn. We waved our flaming sticks in the night, and we sang along with the crowd and the amplified recording as the sun went down: "And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air . . ." Mom loved the flowers of fire, the colorful starbursts, the pinwheels, and the ladyfingers, and my sister liked the golden spiderwebs rushing upward to fill the night sky. My brothers and I loved everything about the wild displays of noise and color, the flares, the surprising candle bombs, but we trembled mostly for the Big Ones, the loud concussions, especially those crashing near the end in quick succession. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! We went ecstatic. The bigger the better.

The Fourth of July bombs were all good bombs, except sometimes. The bomb that took off a neighbor kid's little finger in Woodstock one year was a pretty bad bomb. And the bomb that killed a man accidentally at Lake Ellyn years later was a very bad bomb. Could there ever be a really good bomb? It could not be built to hurt or kill. Maybe it could extract minerals from the ground. Maybe it could knock over an abandoned building, or maybe the Pentagon after everyone goes home. Simple earthworks, performance art, everyone standing back. Bombs away.