

# Crazy Legs

'I don't want you playing with firecrackers! It's too dangerous. You can blow off your fingers, or blind yourself.'

My mother had a point. I mean we were kind of reckless, in that childhood reckless sort of way. You know, seeing who can hold that six inch cannon the longest while the steamy little wick is burning down, and then throwing it at the last moment. WHAT A THRILL! Or putting firecrackers under a glass jar on Sand Hill, and seeing if you can blow it up. CABOOM! WOW!

Of course we each had some kind of guardian angel nudging us

'Don't get too close, that's flying glass. If you don't let go of this firecracker before it blows, you are definitely going to be in a lot of pain. Throw it! Get rid of it stupid! NOW!'

In spite of the warnings, we always toyed with disaster just a little bit. Like shooting those homemade arrows at each other. Simple recipe: find a straight stick, cut the head off a nail, sharpen, press it into one end of the stick, then glue the pieces of crow or gull feather onto the other end, give it a notch for the string and *voila* an arrow to pull back onto your red willow bow. It's truly amazing that we didn't end up walking around with arrows stuck into the tops of our heads.

I wonder if guardian angels are unionized? Do they get overtime?

Back to the fireworks. How could you not play with firecrackers in Crystal Beach? The town was made to pop pop pop like the 25 cent packages, to scream like the dollar long fusers, to keep coming at you like the \$2.95 roman candles. After all, we had what was once the biggest roller coaster in the country. A frolicking screaming car full of holidayers did go flying off that roller coaster into the lake one time, but that's another story.

Our village was a little gem by the lake. Beautiful beaches stretched for miles, shaded by ice floes in the winter and sand dunes in the summer. From 15 hundred mostly polite locals, the town swelled to over 10

thousand boisterous summer people. Visitors came from all around to frolic. Bread and circuses? We had cotton candy and the beach. People would show up for Sunday Mass at St. George's Church in their bathing suits, carrying beach balls.

You can see that our little hamlet was highly blessed in the entertainment department. The stores carried merchandise most unusual, things you might not find up the road in farmey old Ridgeway. So, you tell me, what's a grown lad of 10 years to do when every little store he passes has a big display of fireworks? Tell me truly, if you had your own hard-earned paper route money in your pocket on collection day, could you really just walk by Hatch's Store on a Saturday in October and not go in and at least see what firecrackers they have left over for the year, on sale – so you could at least tell you friends about it!

Spare change is not something that stays in my pocket very long. I mean I'm not afraid to work for my money, but flip the coin over, and I'm not afraid to spend money either. I think that somehow it was the firecrackers in Hatch's Store that did this to me, wrapped in their crinkely shined paper with big bold letters promising BLAST OFF! RAT-A-TAT-TAT! DANGER! AMAZE YOUR FRIENDS!

So it was one beautiful summer's day that Lee, Peter, Danny, Harry and I gathered in Lee's back yard with a bag full of firecrackers, all bought with accumulated allowances, odd job and paper route money. Lee's parents both worked and the 10 year old BOY MIND that meant we had the place to ourselves. No parents around and world is a great big bag of firecrackers.

There is a rhythm to euphoria, not always perceived, but surely always present. The excitement of gathering around and opening the big brown paper bag. The laying out of treasure on the ground. The quick jumbled jostling and grabbing of packages. The rise in pitch and intensity of the voices. The passing around of matches. The tearing open. Releasing the fuse. Watching as Lee lights the first package of the small interconnected ones. The laughter and sheer joy as those little suckers keep going and going 'til gone. Then, chaos! Everybody starts lighting firecrackers all over Lee's back yard.

Years later, you can almost piece together the sequence of a disaster, but never quite. Looking back, I think it basically went like this. When I picked up my firecrackers, I kept the smaller 3 inchers in my hand to light first, but the 4 inch cannons I put in my left pant pocket. The pants were the standard issue working class family, 10 year old boy scuffed up pair of pants, dungarees with big pockets. Big enough for Danny to come along and throw in a lighted cannon of his own. What was he thinking? A joke? Did he know I had firecrackers in my pocket? Bottom line is that I had no time to consider any possibilities as all the jumbled laws of thermodynamics kicked in at once. The firecrackers in my pocket started to explode.

They talk of how time stops when disaster is happening. But if you've got a pocketful of 4 inch cannons that start going off you don't stop, you start jumping. And I did, jumping up and down and yelling and slapping at my pocket, and they're still going off. So I hit the ground and I'm rolling around in a pile of red, orange, yellow, brown leaves. I'm rolling around and slapping and yelling and they're still going off. I hear laughter. No matter. Survival instinct kicks in. The only possible solution, I jump up and untie my belt, undo the zipper and pull down my pants. I manage to straighten underwear and kick off the pants in a simultaneous nanosecond. The damn firecrackers are still going off. My pants are bouncing around in the leaves. I'm standing there in shock, in a daze. My friends are laughing and pointing and doubling over. Then it all stops, the firecrackers, the laughter. For one glorious moment, it's completely quiet. It's a beautiful fall day. I rush to pull on my pants. The neighbourhood dogs start barking like crazy. Danny has disappeared. I'm hearing my mother's voice, 'I don't want you playing with firecrackers. It's too dangerous!'

Five minutes later, I'm feeling kind of shook up, like I might puke. I've got to go. The boys understand, they've all had accidents too. I get on my bike. Ow! My leg really hurts. I peddle home with my right leg, my left leg hanging down.

'I don't want you playing with firecrackers!' becomes my inner voice, my mantra. 'Don't want, don't want . . . no firecrackers!'

For a week I survive all suspicion. I burn the pants with the blown-out pocket in the oil barrel incinerator out in the back field. My story is that

I hurt myself falling off my bike. So now, I've got an injury and a major lie to contend with. And the injury is getting worse. This night it's too much, it hurts terribly and is oozing stuff that is sticking to my pajamas, to the sheets. I'll soon be found out. I stand at the top of the stairs. The warm light from the front room shines half way up. I hear my father and grandfather talking politics. Their voices are friendly. I have to do it. I have to tell.

'Dad, I'm really sore where I hurt myself.'  
'Oh yes, the bike injury. Let's have a look.'

Silence while his skilled St. John Ambulance Instructor hands remove my improvised towel bandage. Ouch! The string of carefully chosen epithets he then uses are uttered with a vociferous passion which I now understand to be his concern for the welfare of me myself, his silly child. At that moment however, they do propel me upstairs to get dressed to go to the hospital 'toute de suite'.

The doctor also let loose a stream of adjectives to emphasize the reality that I was one lucky boy that GANGRENE had not set in YET! Treatment was sulpha drugs and continuous dressings for the next couple of months. Because of the quick actions taken by my father and the doctor, I have two legs to stand on. I was lucky; there's no telling what 5 or 6 inch cannons would have done to me.

Danny never did apologize. I have a charming scar where a pocket could be.

I never told my mother the true story, not yet. But I can guess at what her response would be,

'I told you, never play with firecrackers. They're too dangerous!'