



America's Birthday Party

by William Matthew McCarter

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The 4th of July finally arrived and Jake and I patiently waited for his dad to get to Gram's so we could go camping. We were excited about the possibility of finally getting to light up all of the fireworks that we had bought at Mr. Matthias' stand. Uncle Jake surprised us when he walked in the door with his new girlfriend, Holly Anne, and her son, Larry. His divorce was almost final, but we didn't really expect him to bring Holly Anne. I guess you would probably want to spend the 4th of July with your girlfriend but Larry was a different story. He was kind of a sissy and we really didn't care much for him. Jake and I had been tight for many years and it was kind of awkward having another kid around, especially a mama's boy like Larry. Jake and I discussed "the Larry problem" before and Jake said that his mom always liked it when he had fun and he suspected that Holly Anne wasn't any different than any other mom and would enjoy watching Larry have fun. We tolerated Larry so Holly Anne would like hanging out with Uncle Jake and make him happy. Yeah, I know it was kind of covert and deceiving, but sometimes you had to do those kinds of things to get the girl.

We loaded up Uncle Jake's car with our clothes, our sleeping bags and the grocery sacks full of fireworks, said goodbye to Big Daddy and Gram and then hopped in the back of the car with Larry. Big Daddy went camping with us the last couple of years, but this year, he was just too sick to go; he had been too sick to do a lot of things that summer. Gram asked Uncle Jake if he wanted to take some drinks with him and offered up two eight packs of Peach Nehi. At first, Jake and I lit up like a Christmas tree. Two whole eight packs of Peach Nehi soda! But our elation turned to disappointment when Uncle Jake said, "I don't want to take any bottles with me. I'll just stop off at Snaggletooth's and pick up some canned soda." There went almost two bone's worth of bottles. We had already blown our whole wad of money on fireworks, but after realizing the profit potential of returnable bottles, Jake and I were ready to drink our way into economic prosperity again. Losing out on more than a bone from the empty Peach Nehi bottles threw Jake and I into a mild recession.

"Be careful there at Snaggletooth's," Gram said, "some kid got killed there this past week."

Gram was Uncle Jake's mom and I guess it was hard to not be a mom even after your kids grew up so she warned him about the dangers of Snaggletooth's. I don't see how that is even a problem for us because we were going there in a car and that kid was walking. He was a poor kid from Piankashaw. I could tell that he must have been poor because everyone referred to him as "that kid" or "a kid." If he wasn't poor, they would have said, "So and So's boy" or called him by name. I imagined that he must have been going over to Snaggletooth's to get one of those homemade sandwiches they sell. I don't know how ole Snaggletooth does it – or at least does it legally – but he would sell these kick ass deli sandwiches and take food stamps as payment for them. I didn't think you could use food stamps to buy food that was already made. After all, no one walked into The Dairy Barn and paid for a hamburger with food stamps. I guess he could get away with it because he didn't have to cook anything. I guess it didn't count – at least as far as Uncle Sugar and the US Department of Agriculture was concerned. Anyway, I imagined that the poor kid was walking over there to get a sandwich and got himself hit by a car. I also surmised that since we were in a car, we didn't have anything to worry about and that Gram

was just being Gram.

My theory was correct in that Uncle Jake pulled into Snaggletooth's and parked by the gas pumps without incident. This was a real one-of-a-kind general store; it was the only place that I have ever seen where you could hock your stereo, buy a half gallon of Jack Daniels and a handgun in the same building. The store had a long history in the Piankashaw Valley and Mr. Calhoun had owned it for more than forty years. He was a Good Ole Boy and liked to laugh a lot, but had more teeth than Mr. Ed and the worst dental work in the entire county. His teeth just kind of jutted out in all directions. (Uncle Jake said that he could eat an ear of corn through a picket fence.) Everyone began calling him Snaggletooth and Mr. Calhoun hated that nickname; it only added insult to injury when the natives of Piankashaw began calling his store Snaggletooth's.

At first, the store was called Calhoun's General Store, but in the late 60s, ole Snaggletooth wanted to spruce things up a little bit so he hired Ken DeClue, the town's artist, to come out and paint Pink Panther cartoon characters all over the store, and he changed the name to The Pink Panther. Some lawyer from St. Louis came to him and said that he wasn't authorized to use the Pink Panther for business purposes and were especially troubled by the fact that Pink had a martini glass in his hand. Mr. Calhoun, not wanting to be outdone by some city slicker, went down to the Bowden Brothers' Hardware Store and bought a can of this psychedelic-looking purple paint called Plum Crazy and had Ken paint the Pink Panther purple. He also had him paint glasses on the panther so that he would look a little smarter and changed the name of the store to Professor Plum's. Mr. Calhoun had not had an original idea in his life and evidently the lawyers for Milton Bradley must have found out about his store and wouldn't let him use that name either. So Mr. Calhoun called up Ken again and had him give Professor Plum a smile that matched his own and in an anticlimactic crescendo of inescapable destiny changed the name of his store to Snaggletooth's, the very name that he hated.

Uncle Jake picked up some drinks at the store, put them in the cooler and then filled up with gas. After our pit stop at Snaggletooth's, we headed down the highway to St. Francis State Park, the only camping area in the whole Piankashaw valley that would still have camping spots available on a holiday weekend. Uncle Jake gave each of us kids a wine cooler and told us not to tell Gram; he always told us not to tell Gram when he let us do something of which she would have disapproved. We never told Gram and somehow she never found out; Jake and I believed that once you reached a certain age, you were immune to Gram's cornbread voodoo – her way of knowing you did something wrong - and Uncle Jake had reached the age of immunity. Uncle Jake showed off a little bit while he was driving down the highway by throwing bottle rockets out the window of the car at the people driving the car behind us. It was kind of cool watching Uncle Jake show off for Holly Anne. Jake and I were pretty impressed with the idea of a grown up showing off for a girl; it was nice to know that you never got too old for that sort of thing and we felt a sense of pride about all of the showing off that we had done for Sherry and Stacy, like it had been the most adult thing that we had done all summer long.

While he was showing off for Holly Anne, Uncle Jake let us throw a few bottle rockets out of the window as well. After a few successful attempts at throwing bottle rockets out the rear window, Jake ripped the fuse out of the bottle rocket so that it wouldn't ignite, lit the fuse, acted like he accidentally dropped it in the car and said, "Ooops!" Larry nearly shit his sissy pants as he tried to curl up in the corner of the car and hide from the explosion. Jake's prank worked so well that Uncle Jake even pulled the car over on the side of the road so that it

wouldn't blow up in his face while he was driving and cause an accident. For a minute, I was even scared until I saw Jake laughing. Uncle Jake was pissed off for a minute, but then he started laughing as well. He couldn't get very mad at us for pranking anyway; he was the one that taught us how to do it in the first place and after the initial shock of the pranks we pulled, Uncle Jake usually exhibited a kind of pride, in an "OB 1 has taught you well, Young Skywalker," kind of way. The laughter subsided and Uncle Jake pulled back out onto the highway and continued on toward St. Francis State Park.

After we arrived, we paid our camping fees and bought some firewood, and then Uncle Jake and I put up the tents while the rest of the crew set up the lawn chairs and unpacked the car. Jake and I stoked up the fire and began roasting hot dogs on a stick for lunch. We burned a few hot dogs and ate them along with some potato chips. After washing down our lunch with a Coke and looking at one another with that I-wish-this-was-a-bottle-of-Peach-Nehi lamentation, we dug out some bottle rockets and began shooting them off at the campsite. Jake and I wanted to have another bottle rocket war, but Larry was scared that he would get hurt, so we decided not to because Larry wouldn't have any fun and that meant that Jake and I weren't looking out for Uncle Jake. We giggled under our breath a little bit as Holly Anne dug out some sparklers for him to play with while we lit up jumping jacks, bottle rockets and flying saucers.

After we shot off a few dozen bottle rockets and a couple packs of assorted other explosives, Uncle Jake took us swimming in the St. Francis River. The beach was swamped with people who had also decided to go camping over the 4th of July holiday. Jake and I told his dad about us lighting off M-80s at the quarry and he laughed. As far as Uncle Jake was concerned, Jake and I never got in trouble unless we got caught and that we had amnesty for anything we told him we did that we didn't get caught doing. It was kind of cool because Jake and I had someone that we could tell our exploits to. We even told Uncle Jake about the herd of emergency rescue vehicles and how Brian Bowden's mom called Gram and blamed us for it. It felt really good, getting all of this off our chests and having someone else to laugh with. This was kind of like confession except that you didn't have to say a bunch of prayers or cut any grass for Father Fitzpatrick when you were finished telling on yourself.

When we went back to camp, Uncle Jake dumped a bunch of charcoal in the grill and lit it up. Uncle Jake cooked barbequed hamburgers and hot dogs for dinner. Jake and I ate one of each and finished the bag of potato chips that we had opened for lunch earlier that day. Uncle Jake gave us a wine cooler to chase it down with, told us not to tell Gram, and after everyone finished eating we started shooting off some more fireworks. While we were firing off some whistling rockets, the guy camping next to us said that if we didn't quit shooting fireworks, then he was going to call the Park Ranger and get us kicked out of the park.

"I got a baby and he's in our tent trying to sleep," he said as he walked back over to his camp. Uncle Jake called him a "jack" under his breath as he walked back over toward us. Uncle Jake called everybody a jack when he was pissed off. I didn't fully understand what the functional definition of a jack was, but I did know that it wouldn't be very cool to be one in the context that he often used it.

"I don't know why a guy would go camping on the 4th of July and expect it to be quiet enough for a baby to sleep," he said. Uncle Jake went on to say that the guy was right and that, by law, we weren't supposed to have any fireworks in the park.

Jake, Larry and I quickly scoured the campsite, picking up broken sticks and any papers that even remotely resembled fireworks and put them in a brown paper sack. After we gathered up all of the incriminating evidence, we sat down with Uncle Jake, popped open another cooler and nodded as he talked about what a jack the guy had been. Uncle Jake promised to take us up to the dam later on so that we could finish shooting off the fireworks. Larry was melting cups in the campfire, feeding the flames, and a firebug was beginning to emerge from the mama's boy that we had all come to know. There was something about fire and men that just seemed to go together; maybe it was the oneness with the nature and the primitive man in the collective conscious coming out or something, but all men, even momma's boys, no matter how old they are, like to play with fire. That must be why men like to barbeque so much; it brings out that primitive man, the Neanderthal in them that makes them want to shove a stick up the ass of a large mammal and roast it over an open flame. Soon we were all pitching things into the fire, trying to shake it up into a huge bonfire in a kind of ancient man-ritual rhythmic hypnosis. Somehow, Jake got the bag of trash mixed up with a small sack of fireworks that Uncle Jake had brought with him and threw that sack into the fire. Suddenly, it seemed like a thousand rockets took off out of the fire and blew up all over the place.

Several of these rockets wound up in our neighbor's campsite and immediately we heard the sound of a baby crying. Although it had been an accident and Uncle Jake tried to apologize and weasel his way out of it, the jack still went up to the Park Ranger's office and we still got kicked out of the park. While we were packing up the tents and the other camping gear, Jake and I told Uncle Jake about the dead cat, Uncle Fred's Pinto and how sometimes you just can't stay out of trouble no matter how hard you try. Uncle Jake agreed with us, lending more credence to our almost indubitable hypothesis. He said that this was one of those times as he gave each of us another wine cooler and told us not to tell Gram for what seemed like the thousandth time before he packed up the cooler and closed the trunk of his car.

We got back to Gram's and explained to her what had happened on our camping expedition, how we got kicked out of the park and how all of us were just innocent victims of happenstance as we unpacked the car and got settled in. After we got settled in for the night, Uncle Jake took us out in the backyard so that we could finally shoot off all of the fireworks that we started saving up for at the beginning of the summer. It was a pyrotechnic extravaganza...an evening filled with bright sparkly colors and sonic booms. Big Daddy and Gram even came outside and watched us shoot them off for a while. We shot off the last of the fireworks just before midnight and then we went inside and watched a rebroadcast of the fireworks display that took place at the Veiled Prophet Fair in downtown St. Louis – America's Birthday Party.

The fireworks display at the Veiled Prophet Fair was phenomenal and Jake and I stared at it with a wild kind of wonder. Uncle Jake had been to the Veiled Prophet Fair and had seen the fireworks display in person. He told me and Jake stories about the many times that he had been to the fair, the rock concerts that took place and all of the festivities that were held on the fair grounds. It had been a big event for the last couple of years but this year, 1984, NBC news was even there broadcasting from the grounds of the Gateway Arch. Uncle Jake told us about the fireworks exploding over the Arch and how they lit up the night sky and their explosions seemed to bounce off the rolling waves of the river below. We had put on an extravaganza that was, without a doubt, the finest in the neighborhood, but the kaleidoscopic colors and bursts of explosions that filled the air above the Mississippi River in St. Louis seemed like one of the Seven

Wonders of the World.

I found myself thinking that St. Louis must have been a phenomenal town with phenomenal people and phenomenal things to see. It had to be so much cooler than Piankashaw. For the first time in my life, I wanted to go somewhere outside Piankashaw; for the first time in my life, I discovered that there was life beyond the ball fields at Piankashaw High, the swimming holes and the gravel roads. I had heard about all of these far-off places---St. Louis, Paris, London, and New York---but for some strange reason, they never really existed until now. Sure, I knew they were always there, but they were in an alternate reality than Piankashaw. London and Paris were kind of like heaven and hell; I knew they were there, but they were never part of this world and I imagined that they never would be.

Little Jake and I went to bed after the fireworks display and I lay there in silence, trying to soak up my new revelation that the world had just gotten incredibly bigger. Finally, I went to sleep and dreamed of rowing a canoe through the canals of Venice with Madonna dancing on the bow of the boat, singing "Like a Virgin." I turned over the boat and threw us both into the water and it woke me up. I tried to go back to sleep, hoping to return to some other dream where my subconscious mind twisted some make-believe people into unimaginable situations; their fate dependent upon the whims of my super-ego. Dreams were just that...dreams, but they could often mean so much more than the people and places that were in them.

William Matthew McCarter, a writer and a college professor from Southeast Missouri, completed his doctorate at The University of Texas-Arlington. His writing brings attention to rural America. He recently published academic work in *The Atrium: A Journal of Academic Voices*, *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* and *Fastcapitalism*. He has published critical work in *The Ascentos Review*, *The Steel Toe Review*, and in *The St. John's Humanities Review*. His short story, "On the Road in '94," appeared in *A Few Lines* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His most recent creative publications have been in *Stellaria* and *Midwestern Gothic*. He also has published book reviews in *Wilderness House Literary Review* and in *Southern Historian*. His first academic book, *Homo Redneckus: On Being Not Qwhite in America* was published in 2012.

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