

He'll Blow His Fingers Off!

Jerry Woodfill



Lust for the third grader, like those debilitating issues accompanying puberty's passing, can be equally consuming. At least that was my case when it came for firecrackers regardless of their size, shape, or destructive potential.

A romantic movie's "kissy scene", as we called them, so repulsed my hormone-less psyche that I shielded my eyes behind a half-full butter popcorn box. It would yet be a half decade until the intimate text, *THE FACTS OF LIFE AND LOVE*, was presented to me by my parents on my 12th birthday as my intimate sexual confidant.

But lust for pyrotechnics, that I understood! The driving compulsion for anything fiery, burning, and explosive whether a fourth of July sparkler, cap-gun caps, or even those stupid ashen snakes that mushroomed when lit into a thin tunnel *serpentine* along the sidewalk thrilled my

inner id.

Such was this inexplicable passion. Was this the stuff of the pyromaniac, or, was it child wonder about the mysteries of life? "How could anything so small as a cherry bomb detonate such a blast as to rattle from Ridge Road to the Brantwood Creek and beyond?" It had to be some kind of sorcery that led to this mystic wonderment about fireworks.

There was still another basis for the Woodfill boy's fireworks lust. By some heavenly ordained good fortune, the Woodfill family bi-annually trekked far south beyond the fireworks forbidden states of Indiana and Illinois into the land of pyrotechnic Goshen, Missouri!

Once past the Mississippi River bridge, every 10 miles of Route 66 tempted me as surely as any Calumet City Burlesque Show sidewalk barker:

**GIANT FIREWORKS SELECTION!
STOP HERE!**

This was a typical billboard's message with the following listing of offered pyrotechnics: **M-80s** (an item comparable to a mini Korean War grenade, able to sever at least a thumb if lit inappropriately)

Cherry Bombs (wholly descriptive as these had an inch long fuse akin to a cherry's

stem attached to a spherical red cherry-like explosive which caused a terrible carnage should one be "accidentally" detonated in a neighbor's metal garbage can), and other items of lesser destruction such as the dainty **Lady Fingers**. (this had to be a discriminatory naming of tiny fire-crackers whose sting would be akin to a wasp's if exploded while held with the fingers)

Seeing that first marquee launched my backseat whine, "Please stop, Dad. Please....Please...Please..." as we sailed past the first dozen Missouri purveyors of Indiana pyrotechnic contraband.

The recitation grew louder and more pitiful followed always by the resolute response, "Later, Jerry."

And then; just when hope was, for me becoming a four lettered word of a more earthy type, the miracle event... The gods of pyrotechnics chose my runny-nosed 3 year old sister as the agent of intervention.

"J.R., Susan has to go to the bathroom."

Had I made so obvious a request, the immediate answer would, of course, have been, "We can't stop. Use the milk bottle we brought for that."

But for her royalty, the young princess of Woodward Avenue: "Stop soon, J.R. She can't hold it much longer."

And so it was...To God be the Glory. The only opportunity for urination was the most magnificent fireworks emporium along the entire 2,000 miles of Route 66. It was the equivalent of Jim Moran, Your Courtesy Man's Chicago-land Automobile Dealership, the Riverview Amusement Park with ten times the number of roller coasters, Wrigley Field with 20,000 more seats and night lights.

Mom rushed inside, dragging the full-bladdered Susan to the toilet facilities. I beheld the glory of scores of bins bursting with all manner of explosives: Silver Sleuths, Whistling Screammers, even packaged collections rivaling the Optimist Club's Wicker Park 4th of July extravaganza, staged for the teaming hordes of Hammond-Hessville invaders. Then my eyes beheld my ultimate desire, "I must have them," came an inner voice from the depths of my being.

The compulsion was uncontrollable, "With them, I will be the envy of all Brantwoodian boys under the age of 17." At a lost to understand the pounding need, I spoke, "Dad, can I buy that package of one and one half inchers?"

"Why should I want such? They made a modest report compared to the deafening M-80s and Cherry Bombs. Even the Silver Sleuths had a more impressive blast."

At once, I understood. They were packaged in a string which, when unfolded, was yards and yards in length. Their fuses served as a perilous thread of powder-filled igniters, stitched together pair-by-pair in a domino line of hundreds upon hundreds of one and one-half inch "crackers."

En masse, as an explosive brick the size of a cinder block, their simultaneous detonation would topple a Sherman tank. A cryptic writing, akin to hieroglyphics, explained their collective destructive power. Dad said it was Chinese, the language of the far away land from whence they had come. The intricate fuse threading aroused memories of those machine gunners in World War II combat movies. Those gunners were a two man team, one pulling the trigger, and aiming the rapid fire mechanism, the other holding the long ribbon of bullets. These 1 and ½ inchers were that ribbon of machine gun ammo. With such, I might withstand the entire North Korean Army.

What Dad and Mom did not know was that I was one of the Brantwood platoon of three firecracker lusters, dispatched on a foraging mission to Missouri. This was a bi-annual campaign. My assignment: bring back fire power for the 4th of July revelry of my cracker-less comrades who promised to pay

dearly for my southern contraband.

And so it was, as my sister emerged from the bathroom, bladder voided, I exited the largest fireworks stand in the free world with 10,000 one and one half inchers soon to be the 4th of July ammo for an embattled Brantwoodian army of three.

Predictably, approximately ten miles down the highway toward Grandmother's house came the interrogation:

Mom asked, "What did Jerry buy, J.R.?"

My dad had his answer prepared as he winked at me, "Oh, just a few firecrackers, Helen, the small ones." And Mom's response, that which all moms across the planet from millenniums past, even to that first firecracker lit by that first Chinese child in the presence of Confucius,

"J.R. you shouldn't have.

HE'LL BLOW HIS FINGERS OFF!"

I shrugged, "Why do moms always say that?"

Then, I had the thought, somewhat alarmed, "With 10,000 chances to blow my fingers off, she might be right."

Immediately, I was comforted, by an inner voice, "If I lost my fingers, I could give up those stupid trumpet lessons."

"Either way, I couldn't lose."

He'll Blow His Fingers Off Comprehension Questions



**Fireworks Sign : Vintage 2006
Hammond, Indiana**

(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

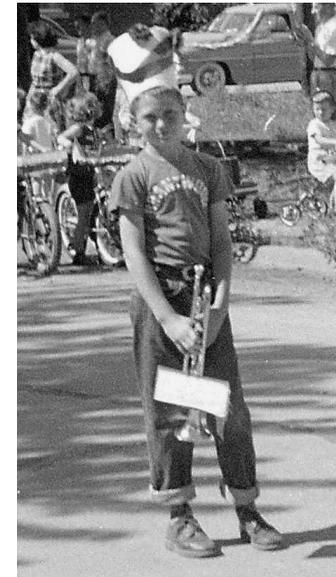
- _____ 1. Jerry's tone compares desire for fireworks to:
- carnal lust
 - Christmas wonder
 - birthday joy
 - getting your first car
- _____ 2. Jerry's inference about his sister Is?
- her parents favor her above him
 - she is extremely intelligent
 - he has deep fondness for her
 - she has bladder problems
- _____ 3. Jerry picks the 1 ½ inchers because:
- he can't read the label
 - they are the most explosive
 - they're like machine gun ammo
 - they'll topple a Sherman tank
- _____ 4. Jerry is the only Brantwood lover Pyrotechnics.

(T)rue or (F)alse.

- _____ 5. Jerry loved trips to Grandma's:
- because of the scenery
 - her state had legal fireworks
 - it was a wonderful family time
 - he could use the milk bottle
- _____ 6. How did Jerry get his dad to stop?
- saying he had to urinate
 - whining continuously
 - asking his parents for fireworks
 - saying he was hungry
- _____ 7. What did his Mom say about his firecrackers?
- "He'll shoot his eye out."
 - "The police will get him."
 - "He'll blow his fingers off."
 - "He'll ruin his trumpet practice."
- _____ 8. What did Jerry imagine about using his fireworks in Indiana?
- The Optimists would use them.
 - They'd help win the Korean War.
 - They would scare his sister.
 - He'd sell them for a new bike.
- _____ 9. Which items were not fireworks:
- Cherry Bombs
 - M-80s
 - Silver Sleuths
 - Dainty Fingers
- _____ 10. How did Jerry learn about adulthood?
- watching romance movies
 - reading the Facts of Life and Love
 - the comics
 - from older boys on the playground
- _____ 11. Where were the firecrackers from?
- Egypt
 - China
 - Indiana
 - Brantwood
- _____ 12. What was the least powerful?
- M-80s
 - Atom Bombs
 - Cherry Bombs
 - Lady Fingers
- _____ 13. Why was a firecracker called a Cherry Bomb?
- Mr. Cherry designed it.
 - The Cherry tree was explosive.
 - It looked like a Cherry.
 - No one knew why.
- _____ 14. What did "full-bladdered" mean?.
- a football term
 - condition of needing a bathroom
 - having eaten too much
 - talking too much
- _____ 15. Jerry's attitude about fireworks was?
- they would make him popular
 - they would earn him money
 - they could be used for mischief
 - all of the above
- _____ 16. What was meant by "Land of pyrotechnic Goshen?"
- Wicker Park on July 4th
 - Brantwood
 - ancient biblical nation
 - Missouri

- _____ 17. What danger did Jerry consider?
 a. losing a thumb to an M-80
 b. blowing his fingers off
 c. stinging his fingers
 d. all of the above
- _____ 18. Why did Jerry think the name *Lady Fingers* was discrimination?
 a. negative connotations for women
 b. men's names were left out
 c. a candy had the same name
 d. *Wasp Stingers* was a better name
- _____ 19. What war was America fighting?
 a. Viet Nam War
 b. World War II
 c. Korean War
 d. War Between the States
- _____ 20. What did Jerry think of the fireworks stand they stopped at?
 a. it was a letdown
 b. the bathrooms were clean
 c. better than a roller coaster park
 d. close to his grandmother's home

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|--------------------|---------------------|
| 8. marquee | lighted sign |
| 9. contraband | illicit goods |
| 10. extravaganza | elaborate act |
| 11. horde | crowd, multitude |
| 12. compulsion | overwhelming desire |
| 13. cryptic | secret, mysterious |
| 14. hieroglyphics | ancient Egyptian |
| 15. foraging | living off the land |
| 16. carnage | destruction of life |
| 17. discriminatory | prejudice |
| 18. serpentine | winding |
| 19. millennium | a thousand years |
| 20. en masse | bodily |
| 21. report | explosive noise |



The innocent 1950s 4th of July parading trumpeter musing about that night's Brantwood fireworks extravaganza.

He'll Blow His Fingers Off Vocabulary List



The feared outcome of Jerry's fireworks mischief.

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>
1. debilitating	weakening
2. puberty	sexual maturity
3. psyche	inner self, ego
4. pyrotechnics	fireworks
5. detonate	explode
6. ordained	meant to be, delegated
7. burlesque	striptease