

Blowing Things Up

by Don Mitchell

In 1955, I was an eight-year-old growing up in what would soon become a northwest suburb of Chicago. Prospect Heights adjoined the more established town of Mount Prospect, where commuters caught their daily trains into The Loop. My memory of the landscape, though, does not include anything resembling a mountain, or a prospect, or any sort of height; everything was dead flat as far as the eye could see. Our modest brick house was an early pioneer on North Prospect Street, flanked by vacant lots on two of its sides and by a cornfield on the third. Only the front yard faced another finished dwelling.

The lot around my family's house was said to be a half-acre, and it seemed an empire. My father had set out to cultivate it masterfully with flower beds, a lilac hedge, a vegetable garden and various exotic horticultural specimens. He even had a beehive tucked away along the cornfield's edge. I played in that familiar yard more afternoons than not, gradually coming to know its every nook and cranny. Unlike John Muir, who flat-out rejected his father's demands that he play in the safety of the family garden, I was content within the confines of that yard. And when I think of my relation to nature in my formative years, that circumscribed landscape was the locus of my interactions.

But I wasn't so much interacting as observing. My approach to nature was aesthetic—philosophic, even—rather than being actively engaged. I remember lying on my back and watching clouds drift by, trying to find messages and meanings in their puffy shapes. Watching spiders build their webs, then wait astride them patiently until some passing fly would get itself entangled. Watching bees foraging for nectar in red clover buds. The closest that I ever came to *acting* in nature was, I believe, when I set out to dig a hole to China in the sandbox that my father had generously built for me. Once past the foot or so of trucked-in sand, though, that meant digging in the black Midwestern dirt. After a couple feet of *that*, I gave up on my excavation project. China was undoubtedly waiting down there somewhere, but I lacked the stamina to see the work through.

All that changed, though, when my cousin from Chicago—Jim—came to spend a week with us at the height of that long summer. Though a year younger than myself, Jim was far more athletic and more socially poised; his conversation crackled with all the latest urban slang. What's more, he showed up with a satchel full of fireworks. Ladyfingers, cherry bombs and silver salutes. Even M-80's, which he told me were against the law. My first whiff of contraband. Jim was, he boasted to me, something of a fireworks dealer in his neighborhood. He had made good money in the local black market. I didn't know what a black market was, but I could see that it had made him rich—for a second grader. He had fireworks to burn.

When he saw my unfinished passage to China, he said he could help out with that. A few well-placed cherry bombs would make the digging easy. Was he suggesting I should pay for his munitions? No. This would be a gift, a token of our friendship. With a garden trowel he dug a narrow chamber at the bottom of my hole, then packed it with a bright red, radish-sized explosive. After lighting up the fuse—his father smoked, so Jim had easy access to matches—he covered the hole with a trash can lid to help contain the force of the explosion. Boom! I can still smell the odor of that gunpowder. When he lifted up the lid, the next couple feet of my tunnel to China had been freed from the surrounding earth. It was just a matter of clearing loose dirt away.

I think we may have rigged and run a couple more explosions, but at length the soil's texture got down to a hardpan that resisted even Jim's best efforts to blow it up. So we moved on to a proud row of poplar trees that my dad had planted as a windbreak along the yard's western boundary—the beside the cornfield. Poplars grow up quickly, and once they mature their bark turns rough and fissured; into these cracks Jim proposed slipping ladyfingers. Soon we were blowing magazine-sized chunks of bark off the trunks of several older trees. Where were all the grownups? I keep asking myself today. How were we allowed to spend a long summer afternoon playing with explosives—and playing quite destructively—with no one taking notice? Fireworks are noisy, after all. They're made to draw attention. I remember feeling kind of sorry for the wounded trees, but also feeling powerful in nature for the first time. Thrilled, in fact, to have acquired this newfound potency. It must have made my cheeks glow. Jim and I were changing things, thanks to his considerable experience with pyrotechnics. We were having an impact on the world around us. I was now a red-blooded activist, no mere observer.

That night, we stayed up until well after dark to watch a zillion fireflies wink across the dew-soaked lawn. How they could do what they did—light themselves up like that—was beyond our understanding, but we realized that we could use them to make flashlights. We began catching fireflies out of mid-air and imprisoning them inside well-capped Mason jars, till we had at least one hundred unwitting captives. With that many fireflies blinking on and off on their personal schedules, two or three could be expected to provide a bit of light at any given moment. Cool. But then Jim had a better idea. “You know what happens when you're riding in the car at night, and one of these gets smeared all across the windshield?”

Yes, of course I knew what happened. “They make the same glow—for a while, anyway.” The bug juice would illuminate the glass for maybe half a minute; then, since the light's source was already dead and gone, the streak of illumination would gradually fade.

“Think of how much light a hundred fireflies could make.”

What he had in mind was to punch a tiny hole in the lid of his Mason jar, then thread the fuse of a firecracker down through it. Dangling in the jar amid that army of captive bugs, it could blow them all up in a moment's conflagration. Then their guts would turn into a luminescent goop on the inside of the glass, lighting up the darkness.

“But won't that break the jar?” I asked him with a note of caution, fearing shards of flying glass cutting us to ribbons.

“We won’t screw the lid down tight. I’ll keep it loose, so that the cap blows clear. Then the explosion will find its way out.”

I am sorry to report that we actually did this, and that Jim’s plan worked beyond our wildest dreams. It was a memorable glow—an iridescent pudding of exploded fireflies. A pale yellow, well-whipped, luminescent yogurt. But it was impossible to keep that light alive for long. We ran in the house with our inventive torch and carried it into a closet, shutting the door tight to maximize the impact. We stared at each other’s faces by the light of those dead bugs. And then, of course, the light went out. The evening’s fun was over.

My cousin Jim grew up restless and on the edge; when he reached his teenage years he seemed to be continually flirting with disaster. There was trouble, I recall, with several of the girlfriends that he managed to fall in love with—and he had a habit of going after women who were several years older. There was trouble, too, with one after another of the cars that he drove off the road; consequently there was also trouble with the law. After a stint at the state university as a gymnastics star, he volunteered for Vietnam and, like many others, came back unwilling to discuss the things he’d seen and done there. He became a husband and a father, then a Christian in a messianic sect. He tackled a career as a financial consultant, and found that he was gifted at investing other peoples’ money. At twenty-nine he had his first cardiac event, and he died of a heart attack at the age of thirty-three. His light, I would have to say, burned brightly but then quickly dimmed. I see him now standing in that closet quite close to me, waving that eerie torch of decimated fireflies. And unaware that he—like they—did not have all much time left.

But Jim did manage to change me in the time we spent—not just in that one week, but throughout our childhoods. He helped to transform me from being the sort of kid who lies on his back and stares at passing clouds, to the kind of kid who takes an active role in the world around him. Within a few weeks of Jim’s momentous visit, I began helping out my father in the garden: pulling stray weeds that had grown up between the vegetables, then breaking up the soil with a three-pronged cultivator. I built a tree house in the branches of a backyard elm. I made some early, halting efforts to help mow the lawn. So something in *my* nature had by then begun to change. The distance, I think, between being a responsible actor in the natural world and its polar opposite—acting, let us say, like a wanton idiot—is not so great as the distance between the passive observer and the person who takes action. By the same token, the differences between political activists of any given stripe is not so great as the difference between them and the legions of the apathetic. Though his way of acting in nature was abrasive—and destructive, too, as well as wrongheaded—Jim got me over a hurdle that had stalled me in discovering my own way of being in the world.

As luck would have it, I grew up to meet and marry a woman who—like myself—shared our generation’s mad flirtation with “going back to the land” in the early 1970’s. For us, it became much more than a pipe dream; on any given day over the past forty years, I’ve had the privilege of being a significant actor in a natural world that is many, many, *many* times larger than the backyard where I spent my boyhood days. And I’ve tried to be a good actor in that world; I avoid behaviors that are grownup versions of blowing things up. True, there are some plants I would prefer not to find here, no matter how much they’d like to make this place their

home; whether in a garden or meadow or a forest, there are weeds to deal with and hopefully discourage. Since we raise sheep who have no means of self-defense against various predators, we have learned to play that role when push has come to shove. At the same time, there is the ongoing goal of elaborating and enriching what is already a complex and wonderfully varied ecosystem. There is much to do—and when I play my role correctly, the resulting pleasure is fulfilling and intense.

But playing that role, I think, did not come part and parcel with my character, my DNA. It is not the way in which I came into the world. Rather, I learned to be an activist in nature from a city-mouse cousin who was handy with explosives and who came out from the city with a satchel full of fireworks. I learned it in the glow of blowing things up with him. And of the many things that Jim and I blew up together, probably the biggest was my penchant for passivity, for limiting my role to philosophic observation. He taught me how to take the far greater pleasure that goes along with stepping up and dirtying one's hands.

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