

4TH OF JULY

THERE WERE NINE of us cousins and only two of them were boys- the oldest and the second to the last. But the boys didn't care they played with us girls anyway: house, make believe, and Barbie's (as long as we let them pop their heads off). We met my Mom's side of the family for a picnic on the Fourth of July every year. These picnics were fantastic! The same park (with the giant hill), the same food (Nannie's banana pudding with the vanilla wafers, the same people (Nannie and Pawpaw, aunts, uncles and cousins along with the six people in my family), year after year.

We played at the park all day. Running from the swings, to the pool, to rolling down Lincoln Hill. Not towards the woody side because that's where the bad people hid who wanted to take little children and hurt them. We could feel every bump and rock on the way down that 50ft slope. Our skin was itchy from sunburn and grass and my hair was its faint shade of green from a summer's worth of pool chlorine. Later we made our trek back to the swings, back to the pool

(1/2 an hour after we ate so that we wouldn't drown), and then it was back to the hill and its bumpy overtures.

My father and uncles would grill the hamburgers and hot dogs while Pawpaw picked a tune on his guitar and smoked a cigar.

"Dad, don't you light that stinky thing." my mom scolded.

"Yeah, Dad," my aunt joined in, "we can't stand the smell."

"You girls leave your Dad alone. He can do as he pleases," Nannie admonished them. Nannie and Pawpaw were so loyal to each other. No one, not even their children, could say anything to one of them without the other sticking up for them. Jim and Irene met on a train heading to Detroit from Inez, Kentucky in the early 1940's and have never parted.

My Dad and uncles would stand within the charcoal smoke plumes to get away from the stench. But pawpaw just chuckled and used his power as the patriarch and lit up. The fumes of his cigar permeated

his skin- that mixed with Black Suede after-shave. I would step up behind him and wrap my arms around his neck and lay my head on his warm shoulders. I loved his smell- it was strong. And he was handsome, old Indian features of some long forgotten ancestor. Chiseled cheekbones, a high forehead and a perpetual tan are the features that my second son, Zachary, luckily inherited from his great-grandfather. Zack and I are both summer babies, born under the sign of cancer. And I share this holiday with him.

My children's holiday experiences are different from my own. We don't celebrate on the holiday itself, but when my sisters, parents and I can work each other into our schedules. My kids have thirteen cousins. In this generation only three of them are girls and two of the cousins live in California. The cousins' range in age from nineteen to three and the older kids are so great with the little ones. Barbie is not the dominatrix that she once was: baseball rules. I watch Zachary, now seven play, his long limbs, tanned from the sun, reach up to give me a quick wave from the make-shift

baseball diamond seen only through the eyes of children.

"BATTER UP!" yells his little brother Nick, a tow-headed boy who was born to be his brother's pitcher.

Jacob, 9 my oldest son, is always the catcher. The oldest cousins Todd, Aaron, and Chris play out field. Megan, the oldest girl cousin, is at second base wearing her pink Mary-Kate and Ashley skort and matching hair scrunchie used to hold back her long blond hair. The twins (also known as lil' Shawn and Seth), are at first base and shortstop, respectively. Adam and Olivia stand at third. Zachary stands in the batter box, chokes up on his big, red plastic bat and waits for that first fast ball-Swing and a Miss. Nick winds up again; Zachary stares him down and CRACK the ball soars to left field. He flies towards first base and knocks over lil' Shawn who hasn't yet learned to not stand in the baseline.

"Come on Todd get the ball," Megan yells, "Throw it in!"

Todd and Aaron collide in the outfield trying their best to catch the ball. Chris comes to the rescue of his athletically challenged older brothers, who are now rolling on the ground laughing so hard their sides hurt. He throws it in and Zack rounded second and he's almost to third. Adam and Olivia are there screaming in their three-year-old exuberance and trying to tackle Zack as he passes by. Heading towards home plate he spies Jacob who is squatted in his Johnny Bench stance with the ball in his glove. Zack shifts down and squares off against his big brother.

"You're out!" shouts my husband, Dave, who is also the official referee for our unofficial games.

Our get-togethers are great, but our holidays are different. The family doesn't commit to make national summer holidays a priority. The people of my childhood are gone. Papa died years ago. Mom and Dad divorced (Mom's remarried, Dad's deserted). My uncles are grandpa's themselves with their own family picnics. And we go to a different park. My childhood park with the big happy hill and squeaky swings now

belongs to the throngs of teenagers in very loud cars, not the kind of place for a family picnic. But, this new park brings a nostalgic atmosphere to the Fourth of July. There are many families at this park in this quaint little Ohio town. Driving through the streets, of Prospect, trying to find a parking space I witness many celebrations. One house has a keg flowing; another has a family playing a game of croquet. Miniature American flags line a walkway and another house flies a POW flag. There's a line at the dairy bar and one little boy crying because his scoop of chocolate is lying on the ground.

The park in Prospect has hosted this celebration for close to a decade now. The volunteer fire department brings their big trucks in and they let the kids turn on and off the lights, but not the sirens. There are food stands and a dunking machine, except it's not a dunking machine anymore. Some insurance company put a stop to people falling into the water (they take all the fun away). Now the machine has the water spill on the head of the victim with the sound of a flushing toilet to delight the spectators. A clown works the crowd

and for a dollar he'll make any balloon sculpture the kids want as long as it's a flower, dog or sword.

We arrive just about two hours before the fireworks start. We let the children play some carnival games and ride the ponies that are chained to a merry-go round. The poor ponies are stuck for hours walking only in circles. It's hot and the sugar from spilled drinks and rotting chicken carcasses from the earlier BBQ are attracting flies, bees and the killer of all summer activities: mosquitoes. Dusk is setting and the hundred families that are here begin to clamor for the best place to view the fireworks. My husband and stepfather walk four city blocks to reach our minivan. The kids need bug spray and we need a blanket to sit on because I forgot to pack the lawn chairs. My mom and I mark our territory in our six-by-six tract of grass and like growling dogs we protect the lot until our men return.

"Can I go get something to drink?" Jacob calls out.

"No," I'm not waiting in that line.

"I have to potty," whines Olivia, my soon to be completely potty-trained three-year-old.

"Honey, can't you hold it? The fireworks are going to be starting."

"Nnnnooooo, I have to go now!"

"The restroom is clear over on the other side of the park," I try to reason with her.

"I have to go too," Nick joins in.

"Fine. Does anyone else have to go?"

"No."

Then my Nannie sweetly asks, "If the line isn't too long, could you get me a funnel cake?"

Exasperated I smile and let out, "of course." Hand in hand we trek off to the bathroom. This holiday isn't as easy as it used to be.

When I was little we could watch the fireworks from our home, not a different town.

After hours at the park our clan would retreat to my house. My dad would pull out the ice



cream maker and swear because we didn't have enough ice. With \$2 in our hands the privileged older cousins would walk to the neighborhood grocery store and sling the icy drippings coming off of the bag on to each other as we screeched all the way home. My dad would attach the handle to the metal tub that is encased in ice. He would have to crank the handle around and around, then add more ice, crank it more, add salt to the ice to make it colder, crank it some more. Finally after a half-an-hour of churning and complaining were done, Mom would spoon bowlfuls to everyone.

"We should try chocolate," my uncle would say.

"Or cut up some cherries," piped up my Dad.

"Get some sprinkles," one of us kids would call out, but picnic after picnic, year after year we still ended up with vanilla-and it was good.

At dusk we would search out the lightning bugs. Our back yard was a goldmine for these glowing friends. Our pie-shaped yard held within its fenced sides Rose-of Sharon bushes, a huge lilac bush and some evergreen shrubs. A lone hydrangea tree with blossoms pure as snow and as big as our fists gave us

a little glimpses of winter in the heat of the summer. The 'snowball' tree also held the power of filling my mother's mouth with the harshest colors of the spectrum. The rainbow would spew out expletives when us kids would have a 'snowball' fight with the tree's huge blossoms. The lightning bugs would hover within the leafy branches of the bushes in an attempt to shield themselves from harm.

The children would pull out our glass jars and my dad would pound holes in the lids. Then we were off tracking the docile creatures like they were 10pt bucks.

"There's one!"

"There's one over there!"

Even our parents would join in on the fun. After a dozen or so in our jars; we would shake them as hard as we could. I don't know why we just did. After the torture had stopped we put the little buggers out of their misery by ripping their golden, glowing guts out and adorning ourselves with their carnage. Rings, earrings, and necklaces: the embers glowed for all of two minutes. We pranced around the yard like we were princesses flashing our jewels to our Pawpaw.

"Don't you girls look pretty," he admired, but then he ran when we would try to give him his own set of earrings from our most recent kill. The guts of the lightning bugs left gooey, glittery, stinky residues that my mom, immediately, made us wash off.

–Julie Lehner