

Bonfire

by Jim Breslin

Let me explain the situation here. I was planning on playing poker with my buddy Joe on this fine Friday night, but that's not where I am. See, my wife Lula told our 14-year-old son he could have some friends over for a bonfire. I didn't hear about this until I came home from work, 10 hours of Florsheim shoe fitting hell, holding the 'cankles' of old ladies while fitting them in tight shiny heels.

Lula told our boy he could have these friends over, but here's my sticking point, she has plans to go to some stinking perfume party. She tells me she can't cancel her plans. She tells me she's RSVP'd. She says it would be rude to cancel.

So, I'm sitting on my back porch, chaperoning these testosterone-laden teens and their girlfriends in the darkened back yard. I can't see a thing from here, they could be making out, or worse, and I wouldn't know. Maybe I could get that spotlight we use to spot deer and shine it back there, but I don't know what sights would turn up.

My companion tonight is my mother in law. She's 70 years old and doesn't speak unless, well she don't speak much at all. She can't hold a conversation. She can't even remember my name. Today she helped set the dinner table and said she needed one more scissor for the place setting.

"What?" I asked.

"Scissor," She said. She picked up a knife off the table. "One more scissor," she said again, as if she'd clarified the whole situation. So she's my companion tonight. I don't think we'll be talking about politics or sports tonight.

I'm a little jealous of my older boy. He just turned 17 and has his driver's license. He has his freedom. Lord knows where he is. Carting some friends around. He told his mother he'd be crashing over Tommy's house tonight. He said he'd be home sometime in the morning.

I'm drinking spiked iced teas, adding a drop of this Vanilla Vodka into my tea.

Okay, maybe more than a drop. On our back porch, the tiki torches are lit and so am I. The kids are running through the yard, I can hear their voices. I figure if I can hear them, that's a good sign. Our neighbors let their dog out, and the mangy mutt instantly starts barking at the kids from behind the fence.

My son keeps calling on me to come down and re-start the fire. He can't keep it going, so I have to go down there like I'm Jeeves the butler and start the fire going again. I'm in this circle of teenagers doing the grunt work.

But this is a big deal for him, to have kids over. I can see he's a bit nervous. He's excited, and I feel for him. He's in that awkward stage, with the freckles fading and the whiskers sprouting on his face. He's taken a sudden interest in girls. He's trying to find his way in this new world. The kid doesn't know what he's in for.

Of course, the kids clam up when I'm down there. They don't want an old man hanging out with them. I layer the newspaper and the kindling in the pit and light the crumpled paper. When I walk away, I can hear the girls giggling behind my back.

Well, I get back to the porch and pour another drink. And another. I put my feet up and the phone rings. My mother in law looks at me.

"I'm not getting it," I say. "Let it ring."

"I'll get it," She says.

"Knock yourself out," I say, and take a swig.

She immediately comes out and hands me the phone.

"Great," I say.

"Thanks," I say.

I put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hello. Mister Thompson?"

Crap, I think. I don't want to talk to anyone that calls me mister. People that call me mister always end up asking for money.

"This is Cassie Griffin, I'm Tommy's mom. I need to talk with Tommy. He told me he's sleeping over your house tonight?"

Shit.

"Uh," I say, "My wife said our son was staying at your house tonight."

There is now silence on both ends. I see the fire has gone out again in the yard. I hear some kids' voices over by the garage.

"I need to talk to him. It's rather urgent." She says with an agitated voice. "Tommy's father... his father has had a heart attack."

Lucky bastard, I think to myself. Some of the kids walk out of the garage and right under the deck, they walk back through the darkness to the group.

Mrs. Griffin starts to cry into the phone. "We don't think he'll make it through the night," She sobs. "Our other boys are here, at the hospital, but we can't find Tommy..."

I'm wondering why my mother in law had to pick up the phone. I'm not sure what Mrs. Griffin wants me to do. I catch a faint whiff of gasoline as though vapor trails have passed the deck.

And then, there's an explosion in the backyard. The whole yard shakes and a fireball shoots up to the sky. All the kids are yelling. A boy screams and I see a figure running, and I realize my own son is engulfed in flames.

I drop the phone and run to the end of the porch. "Drop and Roll!" The kids are yelling at my son as they back away in horror.

"Roll!" I scream out.

The girls are crying. My son is dancing around in tight little circles, flames leaping off his arms, his chest.

I jump off the steps and sprint through the yard and tackle my son in full stride, pushing him down and rolling with him, becoming one with him. As we roll through the grass, I smell the gasoline vapors burning off his t-shirt, burning off his body and filling my lungs, scorching my nostrils. I hug him tightly as we roll, smothering him and wishing and praying the flames would consume me instead. We roll and roll and I don't dare stop. I don't want to know what happens next. I roll my son with all the strength in my heart.

