



Castle Rock

Chapter 6

Rattlesnakes and Fireworks

July 4, 1959

Boys, we are all strangely attracted to dangerous things, whether it's a deadly rattlesnake or illegal fireworks. As children and teens, we are willing to break the rules for the excitement generated by the risky or forbidden. As adults, we create rules to mitigate the danger. Yet, even as adults, the excitement never truly ends and sometimes rules are bent or broken. Here's what happened.

Late in June, my friends and I had been lounging around the city pool. "That's right," I said. "There's gonna be a huge fireworks display from the top of Castle Rock. My Dad told me the Lions Club is gonna put on an enormous show!" The assembled collection of friends was in awe. Fireworks had been outlawed in Golden as a result of several house fires they'd caused in recent years. We could no longer legally buy firecrackers, pop bottle rockets, fountains, and Roman candles then gather together for shows in our own backyards. We were dismayed by the thought of a Fourth without fireworks and moped about it for weeks; so, all hailed the news I brought. We anxiously awaited the Fourth and the Lions' show.

For years, I had looked forward to the Fourth of July nearly as much as Christmas. My parents always hosted a picnic that drew a huge crowd every year. Not only were my grandparents from both sides of the family in attendance, so was every aunt, uncle, and cousin from near and far. The invitations were not limited to family; friends and neighbors came to play horseshoes, eat hamburgers, hot dogs, corn on the cob, and Mom's potato and macaroni salads, which she made by the gallon.

This particular Fourth promised to be even more special. The Lions Club's fireworks display was anticipated to be the best ever. Their plan was to set off the fireworks from atop Castle Rock, the highest point on South Table Mountain. Castle Rock towered over Golden and could be clearly seen from every house in town. Everyone expected a spectacular show. The entire town looked forward to the big event.

At long last the big day arrived. I awoke early, and as I carried a bowl of cereal into the dining room, a strange rattling came through the open window. It started slowly — "clack, clack, clack" — then turned into a loud buzzing. It was unlike anything I had heard before, explosive and sizzling.

I looked out the large picture window in the dining room to the backyard. Our cat Sam was stalking something in the grass. Sam was mostly white with a few black

markings and crept forward toward his prey. I thought it was a bird, but just as Sam was getting close, a triangular head reared from a coiled body with a whirring tail creating the buzzing sound; it was a rattlesnake! As I yelled for Dad, the snake struck, but Sam was too quick. He jumped straight into the air and the snake missed.

Dad and I ran into the backyard and I chased Sam away. He hated to be picked up, and he ran toward the house and Tip, our dog. He and Tip were good friends. Sam often slept curled between Tip's paws. Meanwhile, the snake remained coiled and rattling in the middle of the yard as we looked on from a safe distance.

Dad surveyed the situation and decided to call the police to deal with the rattler. Dad had recently been elected to the city council, so rather than simply dispose of the snake with a shovel or our Remington .22-caliber rifle, he felt compelled to handle it according to city rules. Rattlesnakes were common that summer and the city was running a campaign in *The Transcript*, the weekly paper, encouraging citizens to call the police for snake disposal. The city didn't want people to get bitten trying to kill snakes. And, since we were soon to have the entire family and countless friends over for the Fourth of July picnic, eliminating the rattler was of utmost importance.

In a few minutes a patrol car pulled to a stop at the front of the house. Officer Hal emerged from the car and joined Dad and me in the backyard, where we remained in a standoff with the rattler. Hal grasped the situation, pulled his six-shot service revolver from his holster, and from a distance of about ten feet emptied the cylinder in the general direction of the snake, never hitting it once. The only result was more furious rattling.

"Jesus, Hal," Dad said looking at Officer Hal incredulously. "Chop, go get a shovel."

In seconds, I returned with a long-handled shovel. Dad took the shovel and poked at the snake. It struck again, this time clamping briefly onto the blade, its long fangs ineffective against metal. Startled, I jumped back even though I was out of striking distance. Rattlers are fast! The rattler pulled back into its coiled stance, tongue flicking, rattling louder than ever as if daring another poke. Dad poked again.

After another ineffective rattler strike, the snake decided that a hasty retreat was in his best interest, and headed toward the fence. Dad, with one clean lunge, cut the head off the snake, leaving the body flipping and twisting on the ground. He handed me the shovel.

Boys, Here's What Happened

“Sorry, Don,” Officer Hal offered. “I haven’t fired this thing in awhile. Guess I’m a little rusty.” Dad shrugged and suggested some target practice as Officer Hal headed back to the patrol car.

By this time the snake body and severed head were lying still. I used the shovel to collect the head and carefully examined the fangs with the pocketknife my grandfather had given me. “Don’t touch those fangs. They’re full of poison,” Dad ordered. I deposited the head in the 50-gallon oil drum that sat at the back of the yard. We used the oil drum to burn the household trash on a daily basis. Every yard had an oil drum for trash incineration. No one was concerned with air quality or harmful emissions back then. I then collected the snake’s body, and using my pocketknife, carefully cut off the rattles. I put the rattles in a matchbox I lined with cotton and then deposited the matchbox in the cigar box containing my most precious things: two Indian arrowheads, a non-working silver pocket watch that had belonged to my great grandfather Braun, a few firecrackers left over from the previous Fourth, a large marble that served as my shooter, a Matchbook toy replica of a World War II Jeep, and three one-dollar bills.

With the rattler eliminated, Dad and I climbed into his Pontiac to fetch Grandma Waters, Aunt Hazel, and Aunt Queenie. They didn’t own a car and none of them could drive anyway. Queenie was back to herself on that Fourth of July and the three of them climbed into the back seat armed with containers of fried chicken.

Back home we found Grandma Braun and Tuppen, my grandfather, on the scene, helping Mom set out the food. Soon more and more friends and relatives arrived, each carrying something to eat or drink. Before long, the tables were loaded down with food. Everyone talked, laughed, and loaded plates with samples of everything.

Auntie Boots and my cousins Mike, Fritz, and Joanie arrived with Benny, Joanie’s husband. By then, the first of many horseshoe matches was underway, with Dad and Uncle Roy taking on several neighbors. Beers were opened, bets were made, money traded hands, insults flew.

Before long the yard was filled with people of all ages. My school friends including Joe and Dude were there, as were my neighborhood friends, Mike, Stevie, and John. Joe was the newest friend. He had moved to Golden a few years earlier with his family. Joe’s dad was the new high-school football coach and many of my cousins played on the team. The sheer number of people amazed Joe. “Is there anyone in this town you aren’t related to?” he asked.

Fritz pulled me aside. “You got any firecrackers?” He asked nervously.

“Just a few,” I answered pulling a mostly empty pack from my pocket that I had retrieved from my cigar box.

“We gotta get some more. Paul, Ted (another cousin), and their friends are coming and they got hundreds. Me and Mike were throwing firecrackers at Paul this morning,” he explained referring to his brother Mike. “And now he wants to get even.”

Learning that my ammo stash was low, Mike and Fritz badgered Benny to take them to buy some firecrackers. Although firecrackers were illegal in Golden, they were still readily available just outside the city limits. I begged Dad to let me go along. Once again, he was torn between his new position on the city council and my desire to get my hands on some illegal firecrackers. With his reluctant approval, I ran inside to retrieve the three dollars I had saved from weeks of allowance.

Fifteen minutes later we arrived at the fireworks stand on 44th Avenue, just beyond the city limits. Mike and Fritz bought Black Cats, cherry bombs, pop bottle rockets, and Roman candles. Benny supervised and forbade the purchase of M-80s, claiming they were too dangerous. To my displeasure, he limited my purchases to a few packs of Black Cats and several relatively harmless cones and fountains. Apparently Dad had set some limits while I was fetching my money.

Back home, the crowd was even bigger. We had to park a block away from the house because both sides of 5th Street were packed with cars. Fritz, Mike, and I distributed our explosive cache. I handed out the Black Cats to my friends and we set about blowing up anything we could—soda cans, old toys, drain pipes, and the like. We were getting ready for battle to come.

Before long, my cousin Ted’s ’36 Ford coupe rumbled down the alley behind our house and stopped near the 50-gallon trash incinerator.

“Here they are, get ready!” Fritz yelled.

Paul, Ted, and several other friends climbed out and my friends and I all stepped closer, hoping to inspect the car. Of course they were armed with firecrackers and, looking to even the score with Fritz and Mike, tossed a few in their direction. Fritz retaliated and his throw landed a cherry bomb on the hood of the car. It exploded, leaving a scorch mark on Ted’s custom-painted hood. That brought an angry response, with more firecrackers flying toward Fritz and Mike. Some of the their throws were off the mark, landing near my friends and me. The firecracker war was on! Firecrackers flew in every direction.

Boys, Here's What Happened

All of this was too much for Tip. He enjoyed company and had been the recipient of numerous food handouts, but the sound of the firecrackers sent him running to the back door. The screened door was closed, but that didn't slow him down. He jumped right through a screen panel and headed to my parents' room, where he somehow managed to squeeze under the bed.

Dad, fearing that his reputation as a city councilman was at risk — but also always ready for a practical joke — slipped out of the yard and climbed into his car, which was parked at the top of the driveway. Because he was a volunteer fireman, his car was equipped with red lights and a siren. He flicked on the lights and hit the siren. The flashing lights and screaming siren filled the yard.

Pandemonium broke out. Ted, Paul, and their friends climbed into the car and with body parts hanging out the windows and open doors, Ted hit the gas and the car roared off down the alley. Fritz, Mike, my friends and I immediately stuffed our firecracker stash in hiding places that included the doghouse, under rocks, behind bushes, and anywhere else we could find. A silence filled the yard, which only minutes before had sounded like a war zone. Everyone turned to the back gate expecting to see the police. Dad stepped into the yard with a huge smile on his face.

Uncle Roy figured it out. “Don, was that the siren on your car?” he asked, laughing.

About an hour later, Ted and Paul walked sheepishly into the yard. Fearing arrest, they had hidden Ted's car in a friend's garage a few blocks away and snuck up on the house. Once they determined there were no police waiting to take them to jail and that the joke was on them, they joined in the laughter and agreed to a truce; no more firecrackers.

By then the sun was setting and dusk was falling on the town. Everyone gathered lawn chairs and moved to the front of the house for a full view of Castle Rock and the highly anticipated Lions Club fireworks extravaganza. Soon everyone was waiting in chairs, on the top of cars or anyplace they could settle comfortably; a long show was expected. The sun sank below Lookout Mountain and darkness quickly followed.

We could see flashlights moving on top of Castle Rock as members of the Lions Club set about readying the fireworks. At last, a small explosion was heard, and then a larger explosion followed by a multi-colored, fan-shaped display of burning orange that filled the black sky, then floated down towards the mountain.

“Ooooh, aahh!” Everyone exclaimed as if singing in a choir.

This was repeated several times until a very large explosion rocked the town. All at once multiple displays of bright lights and vivid colors filled the sky, brightly illuminating our town of Golden below. Not only were the fireworks exploding in the sky, they were cascading down the cliffs of Castle Rock, exploding as they fell and shooting sparks and flames in every direction. This brought the assembled family and friends to their feet as they clapped, issued more oohs and aahhs and even a few whistles.

Then nothing. The fireworks stopped a few minutes after they had begun; no long show. The sky went dark. Someone wondered if that was the grand finale. But someone else suggested that it was too early for that.

The phone rang with the distinctive two short rings repeated five times. That was the call to action that went out to the members of the Golden Volunteer Fire Department. As Dad ran to get the phone, I looked up to Castle Rock. The mountain was burning!

Dad listened to the instructions, then jumped into his car. Fritz and I jumped in too, as others scrambled to clear a path for us. With siren wailing and lights flashing, we headed to Castle Rock to fight the fire. We arrived at the base of the mountain in time to see the flames burning the grasses and low brush that covered its sides. The falling firework’s embers had ignited the dry prairie grass about midway down the hillside, and the flames burned furiously as the fire moved toward the base of the cliffs. We watched from the bottom of the mountain with soaked gunnysacks in hand, ready to stop the blaze before it could reach the houses that ringed the mountain. Fortunately, the fire raced upwards, and once it reached the cliffs that were Castle Rock, it died.

With the fire out, the Lions Club crew sheepishly descended the mountain, to where a large crowd had gathered, waiting for an explanation. This was the first, and as we learned later, would be the last, fireworks display from Castle Rock. The organizers had failed to protect the boxes of waiting fireworks adequately, and a falling ember had landed in their midst, igniting everything all at once, and producing the amazing but short display.

Boys, Here's What Happened

We loaded ourselves back into the car and headed for home. Dad left the lights on and hit the siren a few times to the great pleasure of Fritz and me. We arrived home to find everyone still there. Coffee was brewed, desserts were handed out, and the day's events were relived and exaggerated even then. Over the years, the story got better and better as everyone who was there added their unique, and often amplified, perspective.