

Sparkler

written by

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FADE IN:

A sparkler sizzles: Eighteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

EXT. SHEPARD FAMILY BACKYARD - NIGHT

It's in the clutches of LIZZIE, 7, a pink-helmeted daredevil with big blue eyes.

She grips a dirt bike handle with one hand and the sparkler with the other.

She whooshes across the driveway like a meteor shower, her face aglow with crackling silver light.

A half dozen family members watch.

They sit in lawn chairs and eat baked beans, pulled pork, and catfish po' boy sandwiches.

Grinning widely are UNCLE MOON, 60, and AUNT DEB, 55. Moon has a full head of silver hair and red/white striped socks.

UNCLE MOON
She's a lightnin' bolt.

AUNT DEB
Beautiful.

At the end of the driveway towers a homemade wooden ramp, the kind used by skateboarders and BMX bikers.

Little Lizzie rockets up the ramp, whirls the handlebars, and flies back down without a scratch.

Uncle Moon jumps out of his chair at the advanced maneuver.

UNCLE MOON
Sha-ZAM! Look at 'er go.

Chewing on his thumbnail is little Lizzie's dad, BRUCE, 36. He has a handsome face and pipe cleaner arms.

BRUCE
Careful...

He looks to his wife, TINA, 35, petite, beaming with pride.

BRUCE
...Lizzie.

UNCLE MOON

Scoot over here, Lightning Lizzie.
Let's try somethin' else.

The girl darts over and skids to a stop. Uncle Moon flips her dying sparkler into a bucket of water.

UNCLE MOON

I thought up a new trick for you.

Like a pit-crew pro, Uncle Moon zip-ties two smoke bombs to little Lizzie's bike spokes.

UNCLE MOON

Careful now. Watch your legs.

He flicks a blowtorch to light the bombs. A small hiss accompanies a blue flame.

Then smoke billows dramatically from the spokes. It looks like a pro wrestling extravaganza is underway.

UNCLE MOON

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and
girls--here she is--the Great
Lizzie.

Uncle Moon laughs and gestures like a circus ringmaster.

He directs Lizzie back to the driveway.

She zooms. Streams of light blue and lavender smoke trail her bike tires. The smoke flows back and forth--ethereal and noxious at the same time.

Lizzie squeals with delight and flies up the ramp again--higher than ever.

Almost everyone cheers as she rolls down--

--but Bruce sucks his own cheek, biting the inside. His lips twist weirdly.

He stands and sets down his paper plate on a table. The contents are hardly touched.

His po' boy sags in the Florida heat.

AUNT DEB

That girl's stealin' the show.
We'll be talking about this Fourth
of July the rest of our lives.

UNCLE MOON

An' we're not even started yet.
C'mon Lizzie, let's blow something
up.

INT. SHEPARD FAMILY LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The living room table overflows with fireworks and rockets.
All are wrapped in slick, shiny cellophane.

They are aligned in perfect order, like a missile parade for
a rogue leader.

The words on the packaging are alluring and dangerous: Six
Alarm Fire, Black Out, Saturn Missile Battery...

...There are more: Killer Bees, Jumping Jacks, Green Goblin,
Balls to the Wall Artillery Shells, Boom Man Canister Shells,
Magnum Tremors, TNT, Falcon Rising, etc., etc., etc.

UNCLE MOON

What'll we blow up first, kid?

LIZZIE

(Instantly)
The Green Goblin.

She moves that firework to the front of the line. Her blue
eyes are strategic, serious.

UNCLE MOON

The Goblin? Sheesh. That'll give
Aunt Deb a heart attack: I love it.

A radio wavers in and out in the corner of the living room,
caught between two stations. Half talk radio, half music.

Bruce squeezes his way into the room. The screen door slams
behind him: Boom.

He flinches and casts a long look at the fireworks table.

UNCLE MOON

Hey, pops. What's up?

BRUCE

Hot out there.

UNCLE MOON

Yep. Florida in July.

Bruce scans the fireworks arsenal. He moves his lips as he
reads the packaging on the bombs, but no words come out.

Finally he sputters something--

BRUCE

Looks like you're going to war.

UNCLE MOON

Nah. That ain't war, it's spirit.

Bruce nods, then twists his lips and bites his cheek.

The radio plays music, but drifts back to a talk station. The words are fuzzy and strange.

Bruce stares at the fireworks. A moment crawls by.

UNCLE MOON

How are things up north in the city?

BRUCE

Busy. Taking my fifth actuarial exam next month. Super stressful.

UNCLE MOON

Insurance don't make no sense to nobody, I guess.

Moon wrinkles his nose, points to Lizzie.

UNCLE MOON

You got a tough little cookie here, Bruce. Afraid of nothin'.

BRUCE

Yeah. The way she rides up and down that ramp. Unbelievable. We just took off her training wheels in the spring. And now look at her--
(he swallows)
--It's scary.

UNCLE MOON

A natural is what she is.

Lizzie rearranges the fireworks on the table.

UNCLE MOON

Good thing I kept that bike ramp around. Used to belong to Moon Junior.

BRUCE

When I was Lizzie's age, I was a klutz on my bike. I hit an old lady once.

UNCLE MOON

Ouch. You plowed her over?

BRUCE

I wobbled into her knee. Grazed her.

UNCLE MOON

Sidewalk wasn't big enough for both of yuhs?

BRUCE

I got nervous and lost control.

UNCLE MOON

Maybe she shoulda seen ya comin'. A person's gotta step outta harm's way. An' she didn't.

Bruce gazes at the fireworks.

BRUCE

(blurts)

My neighbor blew off his finger during a fireworks display when I was a kid.

UNCLE MOON

Sheesh.

BRUCE

I didn't see it come off...

Uncle Moon nods uncomfortably.

BRUCE

...but I could imagine it.

Bruce shuffles.

BRUCE

And that's why I want to talk with you about the fireworks and Lizzie.

Just like that the radio finds the right frequency. The sound jars loose. A voice complains--loud and clear--

RADIO ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
 ...this will be a battleground
 state in next November's elections.
 Both sides are infusing money into
 their campaigns here...gearing
 up... Fighting for every last vote.

Moon groans and stomps toward the radio.

BRUCE
 (softly, carefully)
 I think I'm going to take Lizzie
 back to the hotel. I don't want her
 around these fireworks. I'm sorry.

Lizzie shifts her eyes to Bruce. Moon shuts off the radio.

The sound dies. Moon pivots toward Bruce. Nobody blinks.

UNCLE MOON
 Sorry. You were saying something?

Moon didn't hear. Bruce tries again.

BRUCE
 Well. What I said. It's just. I
 don't think. Lizzie. Is--

Lizzie's eyes are wide. Bruce looks straight into them. Then
 he twists his lips and casts his eyes at Moon.

Lizzie interrupts, waves the Green Goblin firework.

LIZZIE
 Let's blow stuff up, Uncle Moon.
 The Green Goblin, c'mon.

Uncle Moon laughs. Bruce freezes.

UNCLE MOON
 All right Lizzie, let's grab a cart
 and load 'em up.

They scoot together out the door, abandoning Bruce.

All alone, he stares at the table of fireworks and mutters to
 himself.

BRUCE
 You gotta stop this...

He traces the arc of a rocket on the cellophane packaging.

BRUCE
...you coward.

He searches.

BRUCE
Or you'll lose them.

EXT. SHEPARD FAMILY BACKYARD - NIGHT

Floop!

A green light streaks in the air. An explosion high above. It is followed by 15 similar shots into the sky.

Lizzie jumps for joy. Her face is tinted green from the light thrown off above her by the Green Goblin rockets.

She drifts away from her parents and toward Uncle Moon.

LIZZIE
Killer Bees, Uncle Moon!

UNCLE MOON
Yep.

In a flash, Uncle Moon lights the bees with his blowtorch-- four at one time.

Sparks. Screeches. Small shooting orbs. One drifts toward the onlookers, but fizzles out before striking.

Bruce flinches, clenches his fists. Tina laughs.

UNCLE MOON
Now stand back, Lizzie. An' cover your ears. Everyone else, too.

Moon sets down a plastic water bottle half filled with gunpowder--a makeshift bomb. He blowtorches it and scurries.

A red flash point...BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMM!!

The bottle is obliterated. Ears ring. Shock and Awe.

Bruce stands up, takes a step, and sits down.

Deb scolds Moon.

AUNT DEB
Too much, Moon. Back off.

UNCLE MOON

(chuckling)

Ooops. Gettin' carried away. Sorry, all. Won't be too many more surprises like that. That's almost the last one.

TINA

Hey, Moon, teach Lizzie how to light one.

Bruce whirls, looks at his wife like she's crazy.

TINA

Something small. No bombs.

She turns to her husband before he can protest.

TINA

She needs to know how to handle these things--learn not to fear them.

Bruce frowns, but before he can speak, Moon sets down a tiny ladyfinger firecracker on the ground and beckons Lizzie over.

He gives her a skinny punk stick for lighting fireworks and whispers instructions to her.

BRUCE

Do you think...

TINA

Moon's with her. There's no better teacher. He lit fireworks with me when I was a kid, and I turned out okay, right?

BRUCE

But...Did...

MOON

(loudly to Lizzie)

When it starts fizzing, you gotta run, kid.

Little Lizzie holds the punk to the wick and...

Szhhhhhhhh. It lights.

Lizzie looks on. Transfixed.

BRUCE

Run dammit.

The girl bounds off like a deer. She's well out of the way when the ladyfinger cracks.

Everyone applauds.

UNCLE MOON

'Atta girl!

Aunt Deb claps and turns to Bruce, who looks ill.

AUNT DEB

Bruce, you want another Po' boy?

Bruce stares dumbly.

AUNT DEB

I'll fix you one. You just sit back and relax.

MOON JUNIOR, 24, steps forward with more fireworks.

Deb comes back with an overflowing Po' Boy sandwich for Bruce.

AUNT DEB

Here you go, Bruce. I'm so glad you could make the trip out here. We miss our Tina. And we love Lizzie.

Bruce looks at the plate as if it were full of snakes, but he accepts it.

Now Moon Junior demonstrates to Lizzie how to use the blowtorch. He explains carefully, a natural teacher.

He and Lizzie hold the torch together and inch it toward a firework.

BRUCE

She's too young to be using...

The plate with the po' boy falls off his lap and slops to the ground.

BRUCE

...a blowtorch

The wick starts to sizzle and Lizzie dashes off with Moon Junior. There is a small crack. People applaud.

BRUCE

(to Tina)

We gotta get out of here.

He pulls his chair close and leans toward her.

BRUCE
I can't breathe.

TINA
Bruce?

BRUCE
My jaw. It's throbbing. Look.

TINA
Are you sick?

BRUCE
The catfish: I can't...

Moon and Moon Junior start assembling a series of large firework canisters--heavy duty rockets.

BRUCE
Lizzie's using a blowtorch--

TINA
I know.

BRUCE
This won't end well.

Uncle Moon piles fireworks on top of fireworks. He forms a wall of rockets and canisters.

Little Lizzie watches.

BRUCE
Let's fly back to the city. Right now.

TINA
Oh, baby. Just try and turn off the insurance part of your brain right now. No actuarial tables allowed.

BRUCE
Blowing things up isn't smart.

TINA
Hold my hand.

She grabs his wrist. He takes her hand.

BRUCE
Should I pretend like things aren't
exploding all around us? You can
feel it coming apart, can't you?

Tina squeezes his fingers.

TINA
Just hold my hand.

BRUCE
I won't apologize for being
nervous. Someone's gotta be.

She squeezes some more.

BRUCE
They're nice people, but they wanna
blowtorch everything. We're sitting
on a keg of gunpowder.
(he searches)
I love you and your family...

His eyes dart.

BRUCE
...but why do they want to set us
on fire?

Now Uncle Moon's wall of fireworks is as tall as he is.

UNCLE MOON
Got a special treat for everyone.
Yuh might wanna move back a little.

BRUCE
Lizzie, come over here by me.

She refuses, sticks near Aunt Deb.

AUNT DEB
Don't worry, dad, I've got her.

UNCLE MOON
All right, everyone. Hold onto your
hats.

Moon directs his blowtorch to a long wick.

It sparks. The flame travels for a few seconds toward the
wall of rockets.

A puff of smoke and then...nothing.

A dud.

The fireworks sit silently on the driveway/launch pad.
Several second pass. Anticipation mixes with disappointment.

LIZZIE
They're broken.

She snatches a lit punk and starts to run to the fireworks.

LIZZIE
Lemme light 'em up.

Various shouts ring out: No. No. No.

Too late. She bounds to the launch pad.

A big protective hand grabs her. Moon's hand.

UNCLE MOON
Stay back, little girl.

She's safe.

But Bruce races to the wall of fireworks and kicks it
angrily. He stomps, snorts, knocks it down.

BRUCE
No. No. No. No. That's all.

He picks up a canister and flings away from everyone. Then
another. And another.

It's a throwing tantrum. Bruce's nose runs with fury-snot.

BRUCE
No. No. No. Someone's gonna get
hurt.

Everyone looks at him with confused faces.

And then--boom, boom, boom.

The fireworks that he threw spring to life--rekindled somehow
in the throwing tantrum. They zing and pinwheel in all
directions. Reds. Blues. Silvers.

Bruce looks back, dumbfounded by the arcs of light.

Stunned silence gives way to cheers. Everyone yells out in
delight amid the wild, patriotic, beautiful spectacle.

And then one of the firework canisters fires sideways,
sending a crisp beam of fire straight at Bruce.

He ducks with ninja quickness. A near miss.

Another shot. This one thunks Bruce square in the forehead and ricochets.

He drops. Out cold.

EXT. SHEPARD DRIVEWAY - NIGHT (DREAM).

In his knocked-out dream state, Bruce rides a child's bike that is absurdly too small for his long legs.

He wavers and wobbles across the driveway, no control whatsoever.

Attached to the bike is a giant firecracker--a Green Goblin bomb. The fuse sizzles. It could go off at any moment.

Bruce wobbles the bike to the ramp and goes up a few feet. Then he backslides and crashes. His legs get tangled in the bike chain.

The firecracker wick still sizzles dangerously in the wreckage.

BRUCE

Need a little help here.

Bruce tries to blow out the flame, but it doesn't work. He's about to be blown to bits.

BACK TO PRESENT TIME.

The family huddles around Bruce as he awakens. A cold towel rests against his forehead.

UNCLE MOON

Easy, Bruce. You're back with us.

Bruce, dazed and confused, mutters.

BRUCE

Us. With us.

Lizzie steps forward and hugs her dad as hard as she can.

BRUCE

(still muttering)

With us. Okay. Hold my hand. Need a little help. Crash and burn. Together.

TINA

We have to get you to a hospital.

Uncle Moon helps Bruce to his feet, brings him to a chair.

UNCLE MOON

You gave us a scare, buddy, but
man-oh-man was that a sight. You
definitely got the hardest head in
the family. It's official.

Bruce sits, takes a water bottle. Tina rushes into the house.

LIZZIE

You did it, daddy. You're a hero.

Moments pass as Bruce slowly regains his bearings.

He takes hold of Lizzie's hand.

A few more skyrockets flare into sky, shot from someone
else's backyard. Lizzie watches.

Bruce speaks to his daughter with regained clarity.

BRUCE

I know why you love them, Lizzie:
they're exciting and loud and fun.

He scans the scorch marks/firecracker debris on the driveway.

BRUCE

But they're not the same for me. I
don't get them at all.

He blinks, tries to focus his eyes.

BRUCE

I like them best when they're
farthest away--

One more skyrocket fires off into the night and pops.

BRUCE

--A thousand miles away, I think.

They look together to the dark sky and await the next rocket.

FADE OUT:

THE END.