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Beats Firecrackers All Hollow

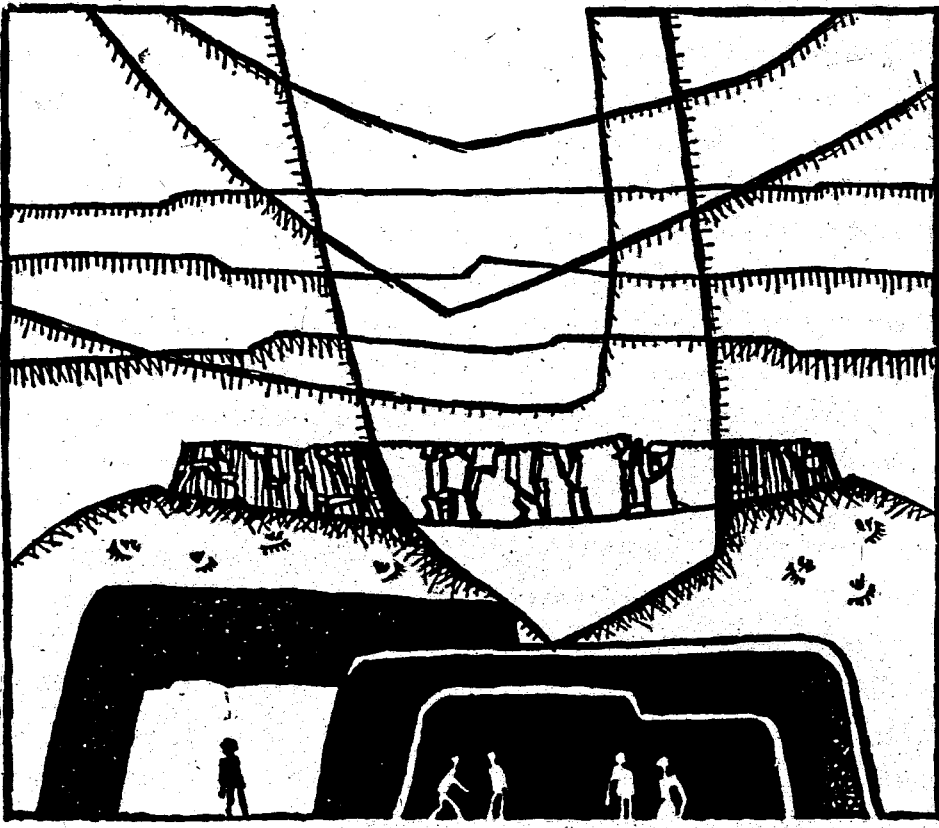
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Oliver La Farge

BEATS FIRECRACKERS ALL HOLLOW

A BUNCH of native kids was setting off firecrackers at Padilla's place down the road. Ben knew very well who they were: Rudolfo and Joe Padilla, Frankie Romero, and Paca Luján who was only nine and a regular tag-along, and also inclined to be too smart for her britches. He hung on the post at the side of the cattle guard, looking that way with the longing, like a sickness in his stomach, of a boy who has played alone ever since school let out.

Last April, not long after his father first came to New Mexico, he had run with them until he made the dire mistake of saying that, even though Rudolfo was eleven going on twelve, he, Ben, should be the leader because he was American and they were Mexicans. He had said it innocently and sincerely, believing that that was the acknowledged order of the world. He had heard his father talking about the quality of the labor he got in these parts. The boys' reaction took him completely by surprise, unready to fight or to run. He got a black eye out of it, a nasty kick on the shin, a cut lip, and a bloody cut on the head where Rudolfo hit him with a stone while he was running.

Those dumb Mexicans, he told himself, bearing down hard in his mind on the word "Mexican," here it's still a week to the Fourth and they're shooting off their crackers. That's the kind of Americans they are. The kids formed in a line, small, black figures with pencilled arms and legs waving as they ran, Paca last and stretching to keep up. They dropped their firecrackers in turn as they passed a certain point. It was some sort of game. The wanting to know what game was a sharp pain.

School had taken up a lot of the day. There were some Anglo kids there from the other end of the valley, and he got together with them. After school let out, Pop had promised to take him down there soon, but Pop was tied up with his road contract, especially now that they had hit a rock ledge and had to blast. It was a fixed-price contract, so every extra day was a loss. Pop went down Sundays and blasted. Pop was an old hand with explosives; that was why Ben wasn't going to have any firecrackers. Pop said he'd seen too many damn fool accidents, there just wasn't any such thing as an explosive you could afford to play with. The native kids made their single line and ran again. By the way they held their arms straight out he guessed that they were playing bomber.

Pop said he'd asked for it, although he also said that Rudolfo had no business throwing that rock. That was dirty fighting.

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Pop told him to go make friends and then *prove* that an Anglo was the natural leader over natives. That meant apologizing, to kids who couldn't even speak straight American. Rudolfo said "husband" when he meant wife. He couldn't make himself do it. He couldn't admit that he needed those kids badly and that they, with their funny names and their foreign speech, didn't need him at all. He turned his back on them, which brought him facing the garage, a tar-paper building in violent contrast with the pinkish-gray adobe house beside it. Next to the garage was the lean-to where Pop kept the tools. The dynamite box was in there, and Ben knew where the key was. If he had a hunk of that he could make their crackers look silly. Even the thought was a pinnacle of wickedness which frightened him.

There was a big bang from down the road, and he heard the kids whooping. He turned again. They were hunkered down in a circle, busy at something. He started down the road. He was not planning to speak to them, he just wanted to see. He picked a stem of grass from the roadside and chewed on it. The grass here grew dry except along the irrigation ditches. Under the sun the road was hot; where trees dappled it, the shadow was sharply cool.

The Padilla place had no fence. The long, low, plain adobe house was more than a hundred feet from the road, with its back turned to it, offering only a couple of small, high windows on that side. From it to the road stretched an area of baked earth and Russian thistle where Padilla had tried, and given up, dry farming. His fields were under the ditch at the back. On either side of the open space *chamisa* grew in tall, fat, gray-green clumps. Ben had long been conscious of the personality of this place, the deserted, empty part by the road, the secretive house, and behind it trees suggesting shade and repose locked away. He wanted to be able to go back there.

The kids, clumped together, were digging and building with

their hands. Behind them lay an open carton box. He stood at the edge of the road, silent, looking. Frankie saw him, but said nothing. He stepped a little nearer. Still they paid him no mind. The kids stood up. They had made a square mound of earth with something like round towers at the corners, and there was the fuse of a giant cracker sticking out of the middle. Rudolfo took a match out of his pants pocket. They could not help noticing him now. Rudolfo stood, match in hand, looking at him.

Ben asked, "Whatcha doing?"

There was a pause. Then Frankie said excitedly, "We're blowin' up Shure Castle."

"Shure Castle?"

Rudolfo said, "Yeah, on Okinawa. My uncle was there."

"Oh." He hadn't thought of these people in the war. "My pop was in the Seabees."

Rudolfo considered. "My uncle, he says the Seabees was good."

Ben moved into the group. Rudolfo said, "*P'atrás*, get back," and touched the match to the fuse. They all jumped back a few paces. Shure Castle blew up, not very well, but enough to shower dirt around them.

"That's swell," Ben said tactfully.

Rudolfo said, "Pretty good. She don't really blow."

Ben stubbed his toe in the ground. "I'm sorry I said that—you know."

"*Sí*. I'm sorry I sock you with that stone."

Everything was set. Ben helped them rebuild the castle and set another cracker in it.

After that had gone off he asked, "How come you're shooting firecrackers so early. It ain't the Fourth yet."

Frankie said, "We got plenty. Rudy's uncle she gave us some, and my dad, and we made some money and got some with that. So we're tryin' some out."

Paca said, "I bet you goin' to have big fireworks."

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You could trust her to talk out of turn. If a brat like that wanted to tag along, she ought to keep her bright ideas to herself.

"Nah. I don't bother with firecrackers. My Pop's a dynamiter. That beats firecrackers all hollow."

Frankie's eyes widened. "You goin' to blow dynamite on the Fourth?"

Ben had to think fast. "No." He quoted his father. "Dynamite ain't to fool with. We only shoot when we got business to."

Joe, the younger Padilla, said, "You yourself you blow it?"

Ben felt big. He was getting somewhere, he was showing them. "Sure. I work with my Pop sometimes, when he needs help."

"Blow some for us," Joe said, his voice begging.

Rudolfo said, "Yeah. Gee— say, that would be the atom bomb!"

Ben shook his head. "Nope. Can't do it. Like I said, it ain't to fool with."

Paca leaned her head on one side and studied him with her large, dark, bright eyes. "Your Dad, I bet he whale you if you touch it."

"He would not. I can use it any time I want to."

"Then blow some for us."

Ben didn't like girls, generically, but he had never met one he disliked as much as this one. He hesitated, holding back from a forbidden decision, then with a sudden sense of power he said, "Okay."

With the sense of their admiration full within him he ran to his place. He went around the tamarisk hedge and slipped to the tool house. The dynamite box was a big, wooden container with a sloping top, like a miniature shed, locked with a padlock. The key was hidden under an old sledge-hammer head. Listening intently, his heart beating, he opened the box. He knew pretty well what he needed.

The sticks of dynamite looked huge. There were some broken

ones. A piece about six inches long lay in a corner. It had the appearance of something that had been overlooked and would not be missed. He took that, a piece of fuse, and then gingerly, for he had heard his father talk, a cap out of the little box in the corner. He went back to Padilla's slowly, because of the cap.

He showed them the stick of dynamite and the fuse, and then the cap lying in his palm.

"You got to handle this like eggs," he said. "It'll go off if you look at it."

They stared at the tiny, lethal thing for all they were worth.

"What we going to blow up?" Rudolfo said.

Ben looked around. His eyes lit on a pile of stones, cleared from the abandoned field. He pointed to them. "Let's make us a real castle."

Now he was the leader. Pop was right. They made a castle of dirt and small stones, with the dynamite lying flat under it at the end of a tunnel. Ben said that was the way to do. He put the cap in the end of the stick, lying on his stomach and reaching into the tunnel delicately, set the fuse in the cap, then he filled the tunnel with dirt.

"That's called tamping," he explained.

Rudolfo held a match towards him.

"You can light it, Rudy," he said with enormous magnanimity. As Rudolfo put the match to the fuse, he called out, "Everybody run. Way back, back by those chamisas."

Paca shouted "*Corre, corre!*"

They ran. They waited by the bushes and stared. Paca put her hand in Frankie's. Slowly the sputtering place on the fuse reached the dirt, disappeared. Nothing happened. An age went by and nothing happened.

Rudolfo looked at Ben, questioning.

"I guess it went out." His great moment had fizzled.

Rudolfo asked, Have you any more *mecha*—that string stuff?"

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Ben could not face another raid on his father's box. "We're awful short," he said. He hated to flop like this. "Look, Rudy, I guess the fuse pulled out of the cap, either that or it went out. Anyway, we can make a bomb out of it. If we just throw that stick with the cap in it, it's bound to go off. Let's go look."

"Okay."

They told the others to stay back and started towards the castle, eyeing it. Paca came right after them, and the other two followed her. Ben and Rudolfo squatted together by the tunnel, the others stood behind them, leaning over.

"There is the hole where it burned in," Rudolfo said.

Ben said, uneasily, "Maybe we better wait—"

Under the ground the fuse had burned draggingly for lack of air. Now it reached the cap and the charge exploded.

