

# Sulfur and Mountain Dew

by Woody Schneider

A time existed in my life before my friends and I had discovered alcohol or drugs, a time when our appetites for mischief were just blossoming. We all were too young or too nervous to drive a car, to come home late, to date loose women, to even actually talk to women, to like school, to like anything, to relate to each other, to even seriously take look in the mirror. It was during the four-year long black hole we call middle school. And I was swept up in the formation of what was to be a group of close friends, forged under the twisted rules that governed a small, unique society in a middle school in the middle of Iowa.

*The empty plastic spool which had once once held a length of fuse rolled across the floor of the garage. It had originally dropped from Joe's hand, as he mashed the last of the fuse into an old peanut-butter jar filled with a quickly dissolving mixture of gasoline and bits of Styrofoam, still visible, but quickly dissolving into the improvised napalm. The container was already partially wrapped in bits of black electrical tape. "Good Lord! These damn fumes." The explosive bundle looked good, downright professional. Joe was definitely the artist among us. The child of a painter and a soybean farmer, he spent most of his free time drawing and painting. But perhaps the real test of an artist is what he does when he is not actually trying to make art. And Joe couldn't help but make whatever he touched into some form of twisted beauty. The growing ball of electrical tape, with a neat curl of slow-burn fuse coming out of it was almost too pretty to light on fire... almost.*

Our parents were all more or less friends and all more or less connected to Grinnell College, a very small liberal arts school dominating our town of Grinnell, Iowa. And that's how we met. Most of us had been together since the days when our parents made play dates for us. Even if my mom wasn't a friend of Stewart's mom, she was a friend of Jake's who played cards with Stewart's. So it all worked out into some sort of a framework. This probably made all of our parents feel better about us hanging out, or so we liked to fantasize. We imagined fathers saying to worried, sleepless mothers, perhaps over late night leftovers, "Don't worry Honey, there's nothing they can put by all the parents without us piecing the clues together."

With this in mind, we romanticized ourselves into some sort of late night bandits, sneaking around, finding hiding-places for things that we didn't need to hide, spending our money on ridiculous equipment we thought we needed. There was an uncomfortable socialism to it. Everything each of us owned was seen as an asset of the entire group to be seized should the need arise. We each managed to hold onto a bit of individuality, but there was a lot of pressure, between the six guys, to conform to some prescribed way-of-life. We shared a common style of clothing, a type of shoe, a unique phraseology. There were group-wide opinions on certain topics, certain people were deemed cool or un-cool, certain pursuits valuable, others a waste of time. We were a gang without the crime or the city or the excuses or the anger, perhaps a romantic idea which boiled down to a much less romantic truth: we were a bunch of greasy pubescent boys geared up for a fight against something ambiguous, maybe nonexistent, like ourselves.

*On its journey, the plastic spool rolled past the spot on the floor where Adam and I crouched, laboring to break apart the clay plugs on the ends of model rocket engines and transfer*

*as much as we could of the black powder within into the bottom of an old "super soaker" squirt-gun box. I was definitely tired. This was certain because whenever I let myself look in one direction too long, I lost all focus and entered an instant trance. But enough sugar and caffeine was still pumping through my veins. I just needed to keep darting my eyes around from time to time, shaking the hands out, keep um steady, maintain blood flow. Adam pulled apart the plastic wrap on another three-pack of rocket engines. His hands were stained with grass and soot, his eyes intensely bloodshot. "This is kinda a waste of good rocket engines." He was the only one actually interested in legitimate model rocketry. The rest of us just wanted to blow things up. "I know," I replied with a grin, "How much do you think we spent on these?" "Well, Joe's mom must have bought more than half of them... so maybe fifty bucks." The little black mound continued to grow steadily, as we worked to the music of clay breaking and the hollow sound of emptied engines absentmindedly thrown aside.*

Our social activity focused around the weekendly poker party. At least we called it playing poker. It was an all night ordeal, always taking place at our friend Joe's farm, and having very specific phases and guidelines. The farm was five miles from the center of Grinnell. Other than the tall lights at the baseball fields and the water tower, the city itself was hidden from us behind the rolling hills painted with straight rows of soybean plants. On our way out to Joe's, as Grinnell fell out of sight under the green crest of a hill, we felt like we were entering own kingdom. The ground felt somehow different underfoot as we climbed out of our family's vehicles carrying cases of Mountain Dew, fresh packs of playing cards, cookies, chips, and other important supplies.

*The spool came to a stop against Grant's white Adidas superstar, though it could have been Jake's, or any of ours for that matter. We all wore the exact same shoes. Jake and Grant were burning swirls of superglue on the concrete floor of the garage. Jake always had lots of glue to bring out to Joe's because he obsessively built plastic models of military vehicles. Grant was*

*laughing and watching the burning swirls. He had a can of Mountain Dew in his hand and a was eating from a Doritos bag which had been re-filled with equal parts gummy dots crushed Oreos. Jake reached quickly through the flames to grab the plastic spool. It was christened with an oozing glob of glue and tossed into to the smoky flames along with the empty glue tube. Grant bust out in new laughter, letting forth a burst of dots half dissolved in soda, some of which landed in the fire. The smell of caramelized sugar blended with the glue fumes in a sweetly toxic bouquet.*

Stage one was cap guns. I never understood the benchmark for the “coolness” test but somehow these things passed. I guess because they made a rather loud bang, cap guns were deemed close enough to real guns and therefore not too childish. For we thought of ourselves as adults, creeping all over the farm, running from place of cover to place of cover. While the sun was setting behind battlements crowned with bean plants, we struggled to ignore side stitches from hastily choked down dinners at home, firing choruses of snaps at each other from behind old farm equipment and around the corners of barns, darting back to cover to reload. We struggled to open the plastic guns up as fast as possible. Peering through wisps of sulfur scented smoke that drifted upwards, we all too often broke some piece of the chrome painted plastic in our hast to exchange the old melty, blackened plastic ring for a cool fresh one from the reservoir bulging in our jean pockets.

Amid the din of snapping, it was impossible to identify the origin of any one snap, if one had been hit, or who had even fired. So those that enjoyed it, or got tired of the usual sneaking, firing and reloading, would finally let loose a scream, bounding over some obstacle to receive a tremendous spray of imaginary bullets and crunch into the darkness of the long grass for a noisy, theatrical death. These deaths were meant to be indistinguishable from the real thing, complete with crawling, shaking and spitting for

some time. When someone announced their team the winner and all arguing over the legitimacy of this call, who actually died or was merely just wounded or maimed, and who had mistaken a kill for what was merely a leg wound was over, the trudge back inside and up to the attic was in order.

*“Guys get over here!” Joe called as a little shower of sparks began work it’s way up the curl of fuse and into the black nest of electrical tape. “Not anywhere near the black powder,” Adam called, forcing his voice to sound a bit lower than it really was. As we got up, I quickly pulled a newspaper over the pile of black sand that was now covering the entire bottom of the box. Jake gave the pile of burning glue and melted plastic spool a cursory stomping, but the fuse was burning and he ran over before the fire was really out, leaving little gooey burning footprints on his way over. Grant spit his current mouthful into the half stamped goo, letting a giggle become a shriek as he too bounded in the direction of the napalm.*

We had invested in cards and dice and chips and special boxes to keep all of this stuff in. We found secret places for it all. We barricaded ourselves into Joe’s attic with mountains of junk food, a roster of movies, and an arsenal of Nerf guns for any additional faux murder. We opened the Oreos. We set up the card table. A deck was selected and inspected. Disgusting amounts of chips were dealt to each person.

Not one of us fully put our mind into playing, though. We would take quick dips in the poker, but the real game was an endless struggle to maintain some semblance of your self-esteem while fighting tooth and nail to make every one else feel horrible about themselves. No topic was off limits. The most intimate information and the most taboo subjects were the weapons of choice. In lieu of those, food, poker chips and, of course, the Nerf weaponry made for excellent projectile assault. Tread softly, but beat everyone to a pulp with your stick.

*A jet of flame burst from the weakest part of the ball of tape. Little balls of burning jelly burst out in globs, as the electrical tape shriveled widening the hole. Soon the tape itself caught fire and the entire spectacle was just a blue and yellow sphere, hidden behind a veil of its own acrid black smoke. Grant waved a hand in front of his face, "Smells like Joe's brother's grundle!" We all laughed. Even Joe. He might not have thought it was funny, but we'll never really know. If he hadn't have laughed it would have only opened the door to more jokes. If I hadn't have laughed, I could be the next target. And anyways, that was pretty funny... right?*

Fueled by Mountain Dew, Cooler Ranch Doritos and bags of Oreo cookies, we demolished each other's self-esteems and paid little attention to the cards until the wee hours of the morning, sometimes all night. When we felt ourselves fading, it was time to make some "happy drink." We crowded around the kitchen table as the moon waxed outside the window. While Joe's parents slept, a large measuring cup was placed in the center of the old oak kitchen table while identical pairs of white socks silently slid through the kitchen. Everything that contained sugar was a viable ingredient. We stood on our tiptoes to pour white sugar from the bag, a splash of Mountain Dew, maple syrup, coffee, molasses, chocolate syrup, concentrated frozen juices and other ingredients were added in smaller quantities to give the drink "texture." Lemon juice, hot sauce, pickle juice or anything else we got our hands on went into the cup. When it was full, we stirred it with a spoon and took turns gulping a mouthful of the crystallized, cloying sludge down our throats. Just the excitement of creating such a monstrosity was enough to keep us jazzed for hours.

*Stewart and Greg burst through the bushes and almost stumbled into the smoking remains of the napalm and tape. Greg was screaming "Barns! Barns!" in a tenor shriek. This was the name of a gym teacher of ours who had taken to reprimanding Greg in gym class for never actually*

*participating by simply screaming "Greg! Greg!" from time to time. This tactic proved ineffective, since Greg had simply opted to "fight fire with fire." Now he had engrained it so far into his vocabulary it became an all purpose exclamation. Greg was certainly the screamer of the bunch. "You suckers missed my napalm," Joe said as he sat down next to Adam and me to help empty the last of the rocked engines.*

The next morning inevitably came, sleep or no sleep. And we drug ourselves out of the sticky, Mountain Dew soaked sleeping bags we had strewn around the room and ran downstairs, pieces of Oreo cookie ground into our hair and smears of the greasy orange Doritos speckling our wrinkled clothing. We strode, once again, out into the farmyard and the stinging light of a crisp Iowan morning.

*Stewart walked among us like a general among his troupes, surveying the state of affairs, making important appearances, doing his best to maintain moral. "Nice work on that napalm, Joe", he said as he scrutinized the black smoking muck in the gravel drive. "Maybe too much tape, you think?" Jake and Grant were now wedging bottle rockets into the charred and quickly drying mess and lighting them. Some broke free and shrieked out into the yard, some exploded in the garage, entrenched in the half dried model glue and sugar candy. In such a closed space the explosions were as loud as gunfire. Stewart walked without flinching through this barrage and inspected our rocket engine emptying. "That pile's getting big. How many is that?" "All in all it'll be 48." It would have felt appropriate to tack a "sir" on the end, but lord knows the weeks of persecuting which might ensue from such a slip. Stewart sauntered away to join Greg who was igniting a wad of gasoline soaked toilet paper hanging precariously from the end of one of Joe's mom's rakes.*

The next few hours were dedicated to the tedious but rewarding work of the pyromaniac. With deliberate haste, we split up into task forces. Some emptied model rocket engines of their black powder, collecting it in a jar or box. Others labored with the contents of Joe's recycling bin and black electric tape, manufacturing casings for

explosives, later to be filled with the black powder. We created Frankensteinian pyrotechnics from assorted fireworks taped together, or vehicles that ran on model rocket engines fastened to some improvised chassis. Sometimes we just burned good old-fashioned puddles of glue or gasoline. A favorite game was to build a small brush fire and dance around it while one person threw a handful of bottle rockets in. The goal was to dodge the projectiles that soon launched from the flaming pile. Usually by mid morning we had exhausted the supply of combustibles and it was time to return home, reeking of sulfur and sweat, and force ourselves back into a “normal” lifestyle.

*“Shit! We’re out of fuse. Joe! Why did you use all the fuse?” Stewart was storming over toward Joe who was burning packs of matches. “Hey, this is my house, so it’s my fuse.” “Christ, we needed that...” This was only a temporary setback. Soon we found ourselves gathered around an old super-soaker box filled with the contents of 48 rocket engines. Atop the pile of black powder was a health pile of newspapers. Stewart put his hands behind his back and began to stroll in front of the incendiary. “When the paper is lit, it will slowly burn down to the black powder and cause a huge explosion. We must all be a safe distance away by this time. Now, who will light the thing?”*

*A moment passed as we shared brief nervous looks. Soon a familiar tenor shriek broke the silence, “Ah, skrew you guys! I don’t give a shit.” Greg hiked up his soot streaked jeans and swiped a big box of strike-anywhere matches from the gravel. We all took a few steps back, ready to run for cover then quickly turn around to see the hellfire.*

We usually carpooled back in some family van, only then crashing from the adrenaline and the sugar that had kept us revved all night. For the whole ride we were planning the purchase of more explosive stuff, cards to replace the soaked deck, more caps and more guns to replace those we broke: bigger, better, larger, scarier, less sleep.

*It seemed like there was no time interval between when he struck the match and when our entire vision was filled with bright white and yellow. There wasn’t a bang, just a strident whoosh*

*then Greg was screaming in his usual way bounding through the bushes. "Ahh! Fucking Barns!" In a state of shock, we giggled nervously to each other until Grant stopped us with a very sober voice "Dudes, I think he's hurt."*

*Grant was right. Greg spent the last few weeks of school at home, with Vaseline all over his head, which looked truly terrifying considering he had no eyebrows or bangs. Joe later discovered some bits of melted plastic embedded in his cheek (we assumed that this was from the plastic bands which hold the super soaker in place). The rest of us spent the rest of the year trying to figure out what to make of this occurrence. To those of us that came away unscathed, it became a problem of what to do with the story. Was it the kind to be retold, romanticized, and embellished over the years to come? Or the dark embarrassing kind that must be kept to one's self? To some extent, we all still struggle with this problem even now. It was an event which kick started some important changes in us that would shape our friendship in the years to come.*

To this day, I still find piles of the round, plastic rings of cap gun ammunition hidden underneath some ancient rubbish in my room back in Iowa. I still have a surplus of crusty partial decks of cards floating around my home in Iowa. After Greg's accident, the poker parties slowly eroded as we were forced to find other things to do. We got too old to feel ok about cap guns. We realized none of us really liked poker that much. All through high school we drifted into our own selves, our own interests. Now there was girls, alcohol, sports, classes, worries, college. Yet a feeling of unity stuck around. Even now, whenever we come back from colleges spread all over the country we share a special friendship, forged over the heat of bottle rockets, the smell of sulfur, and the feeling of peeling a Mountain Dew soaked jack of diamonds off the leg of your jeans.