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Rattlesnakes and Kim Jong-il make my Fourth of July
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—If I were a timber rattlesnake, I would hang out just where I saw a big one three weeks ago in the woods on Devil’s Backbone.

The rocky, southwest exposure provides warmth. Chipmunks and water are close. An impenetrable blackberry thicket protects from hawks and other enemies, including me.

Best of all, cell-phone reception is non-existent, which means I could coil up and never have to see teenagers in flip-flops, yelling, “Oh My God!” into their thumbs.

This rattlesnake is the reason I spent July 4th patriotically protecting my wife from her Yellow Labs, Sophie and Lucy. I also foiled a North Korean missile attack—a fact neither widely known nor sufficiently appreciated.

On the 4th, Americans celebrate declaring independence in 1776 from Great Britain by eating hot dogs and throwing horseshoes at each other.

It took more than a year after the rebellion’s first shots were fired at Lexington for the 56 men of the Second Continental Congress to agree they wanted independence. Levying war against Britain was as big a step as could be taken, because all sides understood that it was treason.

To secure freedom, they set up a rebel government on donations and borrowed money, with no power to tax. This disconnect between ends and means explains why Washington spent one-third of his time begging Congress to buy food for his troops and another third promising his starving soldiers that one bright day in the future at least 25 percent of their descendants would be able to achieve official obesity, even on food stamps.

We celebrate independence that led to freedoms, which seem to be contracting these days. Nonetheless, my wife insists that she should be free to ride her horse, Spirit, in our woods with Sophie and Lucy while also being free of worry about a rumble with a five-foot rattlesnake. This is a far more nuanced understanding of freedom than any of the founders had.

When it comes to rattlesnakes, I have always negotiated no-first-strike, non-aggression treaties. They pose no danger to me as long as I pose no danger to them.

Sophie, however, is a rogue actor who signs no treaties and wouldn't obey any she did sign. She bites all things bright and beautiful. Melissa would not consider trail riding without her and Lucy, who never attacks anything except her tail, which generally wins.

If Sophie, who insists on leading the trail-riding convoy, saw the rattlesnake, she would bite it in its middle, the way she kills water snakes. It would then bite her. Melissa would start mixing it up, trying to drag Sophie away. She too would probably get bitten. Spirit would try to kick Sophie whom she treats as a horsefly in fur. And Lucy would search out a fresh bear pie to roll in, a process she finds comforting in times of emotional turmoil as well as all others.

With this in mind, I spent the week before the 4th looking for this snake without success.

On Independence Day, I found myself defending Melissa's freedom to ride astride the unforgiving steel seat of my tractor, mowing our trails in hope that Melissa might see a snake in the grass before Sophie did.

Eight hours of brushhogging is not fun. Most of the time, you are turned in the seat looking backward and down to avoid hitting rocks with the rotary blade. This means you are keeping one eye on the road in front of you so that you don't run into a tree or over the bank, another eye behind you scanning for rocks, one hand on the wheel steering against the weight of the front-end loader, another hand on the gas throttle, another hand on the lever that adjusts the brushhog's height and your last hand on the crank that tweaks its level.

I parked in the barn at 5. Done. My head had been permanently realigned at a 90-degree angle to my chest, my back was twisted like a spiraled table leg and my brain buzzed from combustion products straight out of the stack.

Melissa jerked me upright. "Do something!" she said. "Seven North Korean missiles were launched toward Hawaii. So far they've gone the length of three football fields." Over the years, Melissa has come to expect me to solve all manner of problems.

I rang up Kim Jong-il on my cell phone, which I consider more dangerous to my well-being than any pit viper.

"Hello. Can you hear me?" I asked.

"Hello. Can you hear me?" he replied.

"Who's this? Can you hear me?"

“This is Kim. Is this Curtis?”

“Yes. Listen. I have to give you a heads-up about this missile stuff. If you don’t splash ‘em immediately, Americans will rise as one and sign over all our General Motors bonds to you personally.”

“OH MY GOD. NOT BONDS. They’ll ruin me. I’m pulling the plug as we speak.”

“Great. How’s it going otherwise?”

“Oh you know, the same old, same old. Starvation here, repression there, not a decent strip joint north of the 38th parallel. Say, what can I send you as a thank-you? A couple of goose-stepping divisions? Want an autographed military tunic from my personal wardrobe? I get them cheap in Hong Kong.”

“You’d give me the shirt off your back, what a guy!”

“We’re short on bourgeois consumer goods, like food. Well, at least our people aren’t fat. And we’re the only country in the world that does not tax its citizens. North Koreans hate taxes more than Republicans.”

“I never understood the difference between a tax and the patriotic bonds you make everyone buy.”

“Big difference. Oopsie. Gotta review some troops. Later.”

And after that Melissa and I went down to Blue Grass for the community picnic where we ate hot dogs, covered dishes and 37,000 desserts. Not a lentil in sight. None of us looked like we had known the empty cooking pots of Valley Forge.

On the 233rd anniversary of our declaration, I nipped off a couple of fights and defended freedom on all fronts, especially from the British who now claim to be the biggest economic loser in American history, thus entitling them to be bailed out with TARP money and declared the 51st state.

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