

LIFE ON JULY 4TH

Teresa Harvey

A few weeks ago on July 4th I went to a friend's house for a BBQ. After a gin and tonic or three – a legacy of my years in England – we headed down to the river to watch the fireworks. As usual I was sceptical. I never quite see the point of fireworks accompanied by loud patriotic hoopla and in fact spent the last two July 4ths in Canada just to avoid that sort of thing. Actually, things didn't quite work out as planned north of the border as they still had some fireworks and patriotism for Canada Day but at least it was a bit more subdued.

Anyway, this year, Canada was scrapped from the agenda due to general apathy so I was left with attending the circus in Boston. I should first mention that it was hot. I'm from Queensland where we certainly get warm weather but somehow Boston manages to top even that. Because I'm from Australia, I feel some sort of duty to act cool in hot weather, so much so that I take pride in still not owning an air conditioner. However, I've started to wonder if that's a sane idea. After all, despite being on the ocean Boston or at least my house rarely gets a sea breeze in summer. And it doesn't seem to cool down at night. In fact, the house is sensibly built for the sub-zero snow-filled winters we also have the pleasure of experiencing here. This means that as soon as summer arrives, all the heat is nicely trapped inside, even when the windows are wide open.

So you can see why any excuse to get out of the house on July 4th was welcomed. And there was the added promise of BBQ and Beer. In fact the party was billed as 'BBQ Beer and Bourbon' but it was so hot that even bourbon on ice wasn't popular. Many Australians think that they have the market cornered for BBQing but I have to say quite a few Americans do actually know what they're doing in this department. It's true they do tend to focus almost exclusively on the meat part of things but if you're going to focus on something then the meat is a good thing to pick. Even better, the BBQ was in a Portuguese neighbourhood, home of 'Casa del Carne' the world's best butcher. It's the sort of place you walk into and suddenly English is a foreign language. But it's worth the culture shock; they have the biggest and most amazingly marinated slabs of meat I've ever seen. A bit of pointing and smiling later you can be in possession of all you need for a fantastic BBQ.

My friends had clearly made the necessary trip to Casa del Carne so all was well. They had also sensibly been to the bottle shop or 'liquor store' as it's known here. I don't know why but somehow 'liquor store' always sounds a bit seedy to me.

Actually most of them are a bit seedy. I try to pick the ones that don't ask to see my ID proving I'm over 21. I suppose I should be flattered that they ask since it really has been some time since I was 21 but I'd just as soon not reveal my true age and indeed address to the grizzled guy behind the counter.

Americans don't seem to have a very comfortable relationship with alcohol. Clearly they like it but quite a few of them also think that this is a bad thing and that they need laws to save them from themselves. Massachusetts is pretty much ahead of the pack in this department. You can't buy alcohol anywhere after 2 am. This rather puts a damper on staying out until dawn. And if you want to buy alcohol on a Sunday you have to go to bar or a restaurant. The seedy liquor stores don't open at all. Well that's not completely true. They do open on Sundays between Thanksgiving and Christmas, presumably because in the heart of winter it is acceptable to drink at home on a Sunday. But that's just one example of the many inconsistencies that exist. Some towns don't sell any alcohol at all, even in restaurants. Such places are always suspiciously surrounded by plenty of giant liquor stores on the town lines. New Hampshire – a state which warrants far more discussion than I can write here but suffice to say all the number plates carry the state motto 'Live Free or Die!' – seems to sell alcohol and indeed guns nearly all the time including Sunday. Utah, home of the Mormons famously has a law that restricts the number of drinks that can be in front of you to one.

So due to these many variations on the puritan theme I wasn't at all sure if the liquor stores would be open on July 4th. To be on the safe side I grabbed a few things from my well stocked bar at home – the obvious antidote to all the weird Sunday and late night rules - and headed over to the BBQ. My friends are the type of Americans that have a very cosy relationship with alcohol so were also well prepared. Some drinks, some meat, some loud music and a game of Frisbee later we were ready to head to the river. Actually I didn't play Frisbee due to not being able to catch the thing without breaking a finger. I blame this on never holding one until I was about 15 – in fact I'm sure they didn't even exist in Australia when I was a kid. Americans on the other hand seem to be born playing the game and can even catch it behind their back. In any case, I was not unhappy to sit out, as the cute guy I was talking to didn't show any interest in playing either. It later turned out he was Canadian.

So let me just state that in Boston 4th of July is a very, very big deal. Of course it's a big deal in a lot of places but Bostonians in particular take it seriously. The focus of things is the Boston Pops concert on the banks of the river followed by the fireworks. I'm told that if you actually want to see the concert with your own eyes then you pretty much have to be sitting in front of the stage by lunchtime. Given that the concert starts at sunset and that the 4th of July is typically one of the hottest days

of the year this has always seemed to me to be something for people with too much time on their hands who want to get sunburnt. In any case, the concert is broadcast on television and blasted from loud speakers all along the river so you can certainly experience quite a lot of it by tuning in or turning up at what is relatively the last minute.

My group was more than happy to skip not only seeing the concert but also hearing most of it given that the music is definitely of the cheesy variety. We walked down to the river trying to avoid the sticky asphalt and got into position just in time for the fireworks. As I mentioned, it was a hot but otherwise lovely evening so the crowds were enormous. People not only lined the banks of the river and the bridges that had been shut down but we could also sense and see that for miles around people were crowded onto balconies and rooftops at many a party. I had in fact additionally been invited to such a party but had been sufficiently distracted by my Canadian that I made an executive decision to pretend I had no other engagements.

This brings up something that I didn't realize the first July 4th I spent in Boston which is that it fulfils a similar role that New Year's Eve does in Australia; it's hot, there are fireworks and many people have parties. So many people in fact that it becomes a bit of a social nightmare to juggle the invitations. That first July 4th I was also sceptical of the fireworks. Despite only having been in Boston a few months, I was triple booked. I lazily went to the closest party. It was so-so but the fireworks were amazing. I thought I had seen a lot of fireworks in my time – during Expo88 we had them every night in Brisbane - but I hadn't seen anything like this.

I was similarly impressed this year, despite having raised expectations. It turned out that unusually the show was being broadcast nationally so there was no holding back. Boston has a large community of scientists and I found myself wondering if any of them had recently put time into improving firework technology because clearly somebody had and the results were spectacular. The accompanying music though was no surprise: Souza marches, the Battle Hymn of the Republic and of course, The Star Spangled Banner, sung so operatically it was almost unrecognizable. And as usual, I felt embarrassed that nobody else was embarrassed by all the cheering, whooping and clapping but really I should be used to it after all my time here. I was pleased to see that my friends and the Canadian were relatively restrained.

Afterward it was still too hot to go home so we headed to the closest bar. This happened to be one of the seedier ones in the neighbourhood. Normally it's filled with barflies, punk rockers and MIT graduate students hoping to save money. Tonight it held a slightly more respectable fireworks overflow crowd. We settled into a discussion about politics. I used to think that Americans didn't care about

politics at all but I've come to realize that quite a few of them do. It's just that it's not something one talks about in polite or even impolite conversation. However, over the last few years things have got more and more unsatisfactory and the dam has burst, bringing a few surprises. People who I thought were conservative mid-Westerners have revealed themselves to be fervent republican-haters. Others whom I'd assumed were liberal academics have turned out to be staunch capitalists. I still find it frustrating that I can't vote but finally with the growing number of political discussions I can at least express an opinion.

Things were going well with the Canadian when disaster struck. I felt a tap on the shoulder, turned around and was met by an acquaintance – a close friend of a close friend. He's a great guy but the reason he was in the bar is that he is there every night. In fact I'd say that nearly every time I've been there I've run into him. As I say he's a smart interesting guy – in fact he has a PhD from MIT – but to say he looks scary is an understatement. He is scruffy with crazy hair and of course he was just a little drunk. He fitted in perfectly with the barflies and in fact started to introduce me to a bunch of them and the barman. My other friends thought it was cool but they clearly had some reservations. I could see the Canadian wondering what other friends I might have up my sleeve. At this point everybody started to get tired and to wonder if any of the buses were still running. We made our excuses to the barflies and left. Spotting a bus, the Canadian escaped while he could.

Oh well, never mind. It was certainly a fun day. I felt a little homesick but also happy to be here. I walked back to my still quite hot apartment and got out my fan. A few stray firecrackers – no doubt bought in New Hampshire– went off as I drifted to sleep.

