

Canada Day

For some people, summer starts with a bang. Literally. The annual Canada Day fireworks display kicks off two months of lemonade, flip-flops and, most important, freedom.

Canada Day has always been a quiet affair around my place; just me, Mom, Benji and Denise, sitting on the roof, eating popcorn and watching the fireworks. Most people in town head down to Victoria Park to watch them, but who wants to be in the middle of all the noise and the mess when you can lie back on your own roof where it's quiet and peaceful? Well, except for Denise. She can't keep quiet for more than two minutes at a time. But I'll take motormouth Denise over a park full of screaming kids any day. But this year Mom has a boyfriend, and Doug has other ideas about how to spend a perfect Canada Day.

"You mean you've never been to the fireworks?" Doug asks.

"Nope."

"Ever?"

"Never."

"Whoa." Doug runs his hands through his hair, like I just blew his mind. "You don't know what you've been missing!"

"I know exactly what I've been missing: big, noisy crowds. Here, it's just us on the roof: our own private viewing."

“It’s like a big party down there! Come on, C-Dog. It’ll be fun, I promise! Please?”

Doug looks at me with sad puppy eyes that would put his dog Suzy to shame. Mom is pretty taken with him, and since he seems to be around for the long haul, I am trying to be patient.

“Fine. But don’t expect me to enjoy myself.”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” Doug says.

Doubtful.

“I think it’s a great change of pace,” Mom says, giving Doug’s arm a squeeze. “I know Denise will be game, and I’m sure your friends will be, too. Live a little, Clarissa!”

I don’t know anybody else who would consider going to a park to watch fireworks a fine example of “living,” but it’s clear the decision has been made. As usual, my vote doesn’t count.

Doug is so thrilled he actually rubs his palms together in excitement. “Rally your troops. We’ll head down around eight to get a good spot.”

“All right, team, let’s set up shop somewhere away from the ice cream trucks,” Doug says.

“And the playground,” I add.

Then Denise pipes up, “And the waterfront. Too many kids jumping in and out of the river. I’m not looking to get soaked, thank you very much.”

Denise and I don’t often agree, but neither of us likes to be bothered by young children. Doug leads us to the middle of the park, on a gentle slope. He sets up camp chairs for my mom, Denise and himself. My mom lays a blanket out in front of them. Benji, Mattie and I wander over to a picnic

table nearby. The sky is still pinky-blue, and it's at least an hour before sundown. We have plenty of time before the fireworks start.

"Want to walk around and see who's here?" Mattie asks.

I'm just getting comfortable and already she wants to move. "Everyone I want to see is right here," I say.

"Except Michael," Benji says, grinning (almost) wickedly. I don't dignify that with an answer.

"There're lots of people here. We probably know some of them. Come on!" Mattie says.

"You go ahead. We'll make sure no one takes the table."

"I'm not going by myself," Mattie pouts. "I guess I'll stay here."

"Sorry we're not as exciting as your boyfriend."

Even in the semi-dark I can see Mattie's neck flush. "Andrew couldn't come."

"Trouble in paradise?" I ask.

Mattie throws herself onto the bench next to me and launches into her latest drama. "Maybe, I don't know! He was supposed to call me, and then he didn't. And when I asked him about tonight he said he was busy but wouldn't tell me with what! It's Canada Day! What could he possibly be doing?"

"Did his family go away for the weekend?" Benji asks, trying to be helpful.

"I don't think so. Their car was in the driveway."

"Were you stalking him?" I know Mattie is boy-crazy, but most people would call staking out a boyfriend's house just plain creepy.

"I wasn't stalking him. I was in the car when my mother drove by, and I just happened to notice that the car was there."

"Sure."

“It’s true! I only have a week before camp, and then I won’t see him all summer! Unless he doesn’t care . . .” Mattie trails off, looking miserable.

“Speaking of camp, I can’t believe you’re leaving me. Aren’t you getting a little old for all that camp stuff?”

Mattie frowns. “What do you mean? I have two years left of regular camp, including this one, and then I can apply to be junior staff. You’re *never* too old for camp.”

“I don’t see what’s so great about it,” I mutter. “It’s like school except you have to sleep over. *Outside.*”

Mattie gasps. “Camp is not like school,” she says. “There aren’t any assignments or essays or teachers.”

“But don’t you have counsellors that teach you stuff?”

“Well, yes, but you can’t just pick up a paddle and start canoeing; someone has to show you how!”

“Someone like a teacher,” I point out. “And don’t you get badges for things?”

Mattie pauses. “Yes, but it’s not like you’re graded or anything.”

“And aren’t there a lot of rules about what you can and can’t do?”

“Yes, but everything has rules, not just school. Without rules we’d live in total chaos.”

“Is that something Andrew taught you?”

Mattie blushes. Her boyfriend is not only a mathlete, but a physics genius.

“Chaos theory happens to be very interesting and applicable in real world situations,” she says.

I cover my ears, blocking out anything that sounds like a definition. “Please, we are not in school. Stop talking like a textbook!”

“I think you would like it if you gave it a chance.”

“Camp or physics?”

“*Camp.*”

I don’t know. Limited electricity, no TV, no hot showers . . .

If you ask me, people who choose to spend a week or a whole summer away at camp probably wish they still lived in pioneer days. I have no romantic notions about the past. I’ll take my air conditioning and HDTV, thank you.

“And Benji, you’re no better: signing up to spend your whole summer with those drama kids.”

“The Gaslighters,” Benji corrects me, using the nickname created for and only used by the youth members of the Gaslight Community Players. “Plus, it’s not all day, we’re usually done around four. You don’t get up til noon, anyways, so that’s only a few hours you’ll have to fend for yourself.”

“There’s always Michael,” Mattie says slyly. I don’t respond. This is her getting back at me for the Andrew comments.

Michael Greenblat and I might be dating. I’m not sure. All I know is he calls me sometimes to go for a walk or to get slushies, and I go to his baseball games. We don’t ever touch or talk about whether or not we are dating, so you can see why I’m confused. Mattie is convinced that he is in love with me, but I humiliated him in front of a whole restaurant of people a few months ago, so I can understand why he isn’t in any rush to call me his girlfriend.

“Look! There he is.”

All three of us sit up and stare in the direction that Mattie is pointing. The crowds are getting thicker, and it’s just dark enough now that faces are getting hard to make out. But after some scanning I see that, sure enough, Michael is sitting in a camp chair surrounded by his entire family.