



Slice of life

# Big bang theory

Paul Johnson on the origin of fireworks.  
Illustration by Timothy McEvenue

China's national legislature has passed a new law ordering adults to visit their elderly parents. No word on whether the legislature will pass a corresponding law ordering elderly parents to be more interesting. Or for your dad to stop telling stories about a memorable meal he ate in 1951. Or for your mum to stop showing pictures of you in the bathtub when you bring a girlfriend home to visit.

The film director Alfred Hitchcock said, 'Drama is life with the dull bits cut out,' and this is why Bruce Willis never visited his parents in any of the *Die Hard* movies. When I write fiction, I challenge myself to include the dull bits but try and present them in an interesting way. For example, if you're watching a TV show and a character talks about the weather – that's boring. But if the person talking about the weather is naked or on fire – that's interesting!

I use this trick to help me pay better attention when life gets monotonous. If someone complains they've told me something three times, I answer, 'Try telling me again, but this time while taking your clothes off.' That person's boring news just got memorable.

(Disclaimer: Reactions to this request may vary; for example, my wife had a very different reaction to my former boss Mark.)

I have a theory that the desire to add a little excitement to life's dull bits is what inspired the invention of fireworks. This month hundreds of millions of Chinese people will return home for Chinese New Year and join in the tradition of family reunion dinners, a few glasses of alcohol, followed by a year's worth of mum and dad's disapproval, and then the sensory cleanse of fireworks.

Historians say the Chinese invented fireworks in the 7th century, and it's impossible to know the inventor's original motivation, but it wouldn't surprise me to learn the idea was conceived at a Chinese New Year family gathering when the inventor prayed for loud noises, bright lights, or explosions to drown out the sound of his parents' overwhelming disappointment.

'When are you going to get a better job? When will you get

married? Why don't you visit more often so we have more opportunities to reinforce our disapproval?'

– Kaboom! Pop! Bang! –  
'Sorry, what did you say? I couldn't hear your disappointment over all these fireworks.'

There's not much that annoys me in this world, but if I went a hundred years without hearing another firecracker it would be too soon. Firecrackers during Spring Festival. Firecrackers at weddings. Firecrackers when a new business opens. Firecrackers when a building is renovated. Firecrackers at 5.15am on a Sunday morning. In English we have a proverb: The early bird gets the worm. But in the case of firecrackers at 5.15am, I prefer the Chinese proverb: The first bird out of the bush gets shot.

Can we call a truce on firecrackers? Keep every other category of fireworks; the roman candles, the horsetails, the ground bloom flowers, but let's call it quits on firecrackers, which are nothing but noise unaccompanied by any visually pleasing justification. Firecrackers are the loud, ugly friend a good wingman pretends to like so his best friend can have a moment alone with sparklers.

If aliens were studying human technology and examined the firecracker, they would draw no other conclusion as to its purpose than to startle people. Has any other invention caused more spilling of hot beverages and utterances of the words, 'What the hell was that??' Does anyone like to be startled? Wherever it is you're reading this, raise your hand if you like to be startled. I didn't think so.

A Chinese friend explained firecrackers are meant to scare off bad spirits. This strikes me as an inefficient system, because if a neighbour renovates then sets off firecrackers to scare off bad spirits, aren't those spirits just going to fly through my open windows? Then I have to light firecrackers and

scatter the spirits right back over to his place? Merely scattering bad spirits seems like a vicious cycle that couldn't satisfy anyone but firecracker companies. Couldn't we offer the bad

spirits one giant safe house outside of town, free from the threat of firecrackers?

Firecrackers also reinforce negative lessons for children like my eight-year-old son, whom we're trying to teach not to correlate volume with importance. It's hard for me to teach him you don't have to yell to be taken seriously after he sees all the attention firecrackers are getting. But, then again, I don't want to make all fireworks off limit; otherwise, he might never come home to visit.

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