

New Nonfiction from Leah McNaughton Lederman: “Man of Steel”



There's a solid history of stupid when it comes to fireworks at our family cabin at the corner of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and—as Dad called it—West by-golly-stand-up-and-smile-when-you-say-it Virginia. When we spent weeks of our summers there in the eighties, Dad developed his own sort of bird call: “Careful!” The mountains put him on edge.

In his defense, between the creek, the pool, the fire, the road, the wasps, the bears, and the cottonmouths—and being completely off the grid, forty-five minutes from the nearest

emergency room—there was a variety of creative deaths and injuries available. We knew where Dad was when we heard “Careful,” and headed in the opposite direction with our handfuls of bottle rockets.

He always showed up a few days in, and we knew without asking he wouldn’t stay long. My grandmother and uncle had both lamented, over the years, that his trips to the cabin had become less frequent since his return from Vietnam and, back when he still drank, he drank more when he was there. He explained it in simple terms: “I went camping for a year, once. That’s enough for me.”

On her own in the Appalachians with seven kids, Mom used to hand out packets of gunpowder snaps just to get us out of her hair, and we set to snapping them on each other’s bare skin or combining several snaps into one giant snap and throwing it in the fire. My cousins liked to play “who can hold the firecracker the longest,” a game with no discernible winner.

We hadn’t grown out of it and weren’t any smarter three decades later, in the summer of 2010. Our extended households arrived by the carload in the days before the Fourth of July each year, turning the yard into a parking lot. We were there not just to blow things up but to rebuild the cabin, on account of snow having caved in its roof.

Children spilled out from their hours-long imprisonment and sprawled into the surrounding woods to make sure everything was still there: the creek, the pool, the fire, the road, the wasps, the bears, and the cottonmouths. Inevitably one of them discovered an unsuspecting toad and the cousins all fought over who was going to “rescue” it. I joined my siblings barking orders to leave the thing alone so that it could limp away gratefully, albeit bedraggled and panting. Our aunts and uncles had said the same thing to us when we spent summers there leaving hapless amphibians in our wake.

In the midst of all the unloading, my brother Asher crouched near the fire he'd somehow already built, lighting bottle rockets that would flash across the creek. Grandchildren materialized from behind boulders and dropped down from trees, leaving behind half-erected tents and protesting parents, toppling themselves and each other in their frenzy to see which uncle was going to do what next.

The extent of pyrotechnic safety was a quick headcount to ensure the littlest kids were accounted for and seated behind a boulder. Asher and the oldest nieces and nephews took their places behind the behemoth slab of sandstone we'd always called "Grandfather's rock," and began their assault. One after another, bottle rockets zipped across the creek and burst, miniature contrails marking their trajectory up the opposite slope and crisscrossing through the trees like a stringboard.

Each explosion drew more cheers from the younger children, and competition between the bottle-rocket-lighters led to the epic discovery that bottle rockets did in fact explode underwater. The submerged blast made a "thworp" sound like a muffled whale fart followed by a satisfying "bloop" as bubbles burst to the surface. Cheers exploded from all directions, each time.

The smoke bombs were next. The grandkids lined up, each year another one old enough to light their first, and tossed a different colored ball into the rushing waters. Tightly coiled smoke unraveled behind each one, releasing a stream of color. The air in the valley was heavy with moisture that had nowhere to go, so the purples, yellows, reds, and oranges mixed and swirled together, creating a sunset you could walk into.

Those first few days, we filled that valley with gunpowder and with the noise of power drills and hammering. The cabin got a second story and the new roof's trusses were up. Then on July Fourth, my oldest brother Jim started preparations for his annual fireworks show in the field across the street. With

nieces and nephews fetching him tools and beers, he installed an impromptu fence, muttering to himself about safety precautions as he adjusted scraps of lattice fencing and particle board.

There couldn't be a repeat of last year, when a mortar zipped over the heads of a dozen-odd grandchildren, over the cement pool, and exploded directly above the cabin's front porch where Grandmother was seated. She'd clapped her hands and asked, "Have the fireworks started?"

This year, Mom planned to sit with Grandma in the relative protection of the car to watch the show.

Dad showed up at dusk and immediately harangued a group of feral grandchildren charging past, "Careful!" My nephew stopped to give him a quick squeeze around the waist then zipped off just as quickly. Dad's arms were still raised in a startled half hug as he looked down at the little-boy-shaped stamp of mud across the front of his khaki shorts.

"Welp, that didn't take long," he said, brushing away the mud.

I snagged a baby wipe from my sister-in-law's diaper bag and offered it to him. "It's Maryland. If you're not dirty in the first five minutes, you're not doing it right."

"You know, a little mud never hurt anybody." He took the wipe and dabbed at his shorts. "We'd spend weeks in the jungle in Vietnam. You know, ate there, slept there, shot and got shot there. Got to a point where the only difference between us and the mud was that we had skin."

He laughed and handed back the soiled wipe, which I held by the corner and dropped in the cabin's garbage can before joining my little boy for the fireworks. He and most of the kids were on blankets on the ground, trading glowsticks.

Dad situated himself on the bench just as Jim lit the first of

the cakes and occasionally during the show he'd let out an appreciative "Whoa ho ho!" More often, though, he was signaling passing cars to slow down, or repeating "careful" to any grandchild who moved.

The truth was, he didn't much care for fireworks. He'd seen enough of them for a lifetime during the Tet Offensive, a period of time that supplied a great number of his regular nightmares and the piece of shrapnel from a mortar lodged "Forrest Gump style" just below his butt. He'd stayed in the field the night he was wounded so as not to leave his men. Together they watched the fireworks displays and shot back with their own.

The morning after the Fourth of July, I was washing dishes when Dad came into the cabin. Outside, grandchildren shrieked with glee while bottle rockets discharged at random intervals. Here and there something bigger would go off, and neighbors up and down the road answered with their own explosions. Dad didn't speak but groaned quietly as he eased himself on to the musty couch and opened his bible, spreading it across one knee. It was a familiar pose. This time, though, he didn't run his hand down the length of the page while he read. He stared at the book, but he never turned the page.

He'd been on patrol with his platoon north of Quang Tri when there was a tremendous boom. He told me it was like "a thunderclap on steroids." The earth shook beneath their feet and a gigantic fireball plumed in the distance. They were sure it was a nuclear bomb, and spent the next few hours in the dripping, humid jungle convinced they would never see their homes again. A few hours passed before they learned it was the explosion of 150 tons of munitions at the ammo dump in Dong Ha, about eighty miles away. They were in the clear. Still, Dad didn't much care much for abrupt, random explosions.

Unless he was the one doing the exploding. Later that afternoon, I joined him back by the fire with my sister Cori

and brother Peter. Grandkids swarmed, all waiting their turn to light the next thing. My niece Channin batted at the military-grade mosquitos and groaned when she found the can of bug spray empty.

Dad grinned. "Eh, just chuck it in the fire." He crossed one arm across his chest and with his other hand, he smoothed his moustache. Starting with his thumb and forefinger pinched in the middle, he ran them towards the opposite ends of the handlebars.

Channin, wary but obedient, tossed in the can. Immediately, we all took backwards strides and found cover behind trees or rocks. Cori shooed the younger grandchildren towards the cabin, promising them bubbles.

I locked eyes with Peter, the man who'd once put leeches on his ears and called them earrings, and the look on his face reflected mine: *This is bad. Also, There's no way I'm going to miss this.* Dad stood off to the side of the footpath, the same amused look on his face as when he watched me parallel park: something was about to go wrong and it was going to be funny when it did.

When the can blew, about a quarter of the fire went with it, exploding logs into ember-riddled splinters on a ten-foot trajectory towards the creek. The mini boulders circling the firepit were dislodged and lolled aimlessly in the surrounding sand. After checking ourselves over for shrapnel, we erupted into frenzied cheers and applause. Dad laughed so hard his face was one big crinkle, and then he let out another one of those "Whoa, ho hos!"

Across the fire, I looked at Pete. He was grinning, and when we made eye contact again, he clenched his teeth and raised his eyebrows in a "Can you believe that just happened?" face. We were relieved when Mom rang the dinner bell.

On the day after the annual fireworks show, we blew up

watermelons. Why we had declared that war, no one knew. As with most of my brothers' absurd, and generally-just-plain-stupid ideas—like “Bottle Rocket Badminton”—it was a collective effort.

The boys would huddle together with screwdrivers, hatchets, and cordless drills in hand, discussing geometry and the laws of buoyancy. It took a lot of planning to stabilize the fruit on a makeshift platform so that, after they'd bored holes into it and stuffed it with mortars, it could float downstream without turning over and extinguishing the wick. We couldn't do it in the yard on account of the exploded bits attracting wasps—a lesson we'd learned the hard way.

“We used watermelons for bayonet practice in Basic Training,” my dad said to me once when I was a teenager. I was doing my best to cut up a watermelon, struggling to pull the blade through its reluctant innards. His arms crossed, he leaned back against the counter and watched with his head tilted to the side, those bushy eyebrows raised, assessing my work. He told me to be careful and then continued, “They mimic the suction of a human body. In the movies, they show ‘em just hacking away at someone with a blade, but it's not like that. There's a lot of pressure to pull against.” He snagged one of the pieces I'd already carved and took a bite. “That's why they use watermelons.”

Once my brothers had constructed the watermelon-stabilizing platform, we began our procession back to the creek, an assortment of cousins and siblings and grandchildren, all of us rating our favorite explosions from previous years. Whoever's job it was to set the thing in the creek had to get away real fast, which is why we usually left it to Peter. The wick hissed in response to his lighter and we held our breath while he skittered back to shore like a water spider.

The mortar ignited, and the blast lifted the bulbous fruit into the air for a dazzling moment before the rind ripped open

and fleshy pink innards plopped all over the stream and the opposite slope. We lost our damn minds. Jumping and hollering, belligerent high fives everywhere. Jesse threw back his head and shouted, "I hate you, watermelon!"

I loved the watermelon war as much as anyone else, for the pure absurdity of it and because blowing up fruit is surprisingly satisfying. Every time, though, I'd watch the chunks of watermelon careening downstream, swirling with the current, and I'd think about the suction of a blade through watermelon, just like the suction of a blade through a human body, exposing pink flesh.

The next morning, my two-year-old son, RP combed the yard for spent bottle rocket sticks, yelling "Boom!" all the while. It was his first word. Even when I stepped inside for coffee, I knew where he was from his onomatopoeic shouts.

Blankie in hand, he marched over to my Dad, bellowing, "BOOM!" He threw his arms in the air for emphasis. Dad's eyes lit up and he repeated the motion, answering with his own sonorous "BOOM!" much to his grandson's delight. Finally, someone who understood.

"I've seen that gesture before," Dad said, smiling. He leaned in a little closer to my little boy. "Means something's about to go 'boom'."

RP stared up at him, grinning, and proffered a handful of spent bottle rockets.

"No thanks," Dad said.

Unfazed, RP toddler-stomped off in search of someone willing to make things explode. I lingered near Dad, waiting for the story I knew was coming. It was so good my siblings and I often retold it to each other.

"So this one time," he began, taking a step closer to me and already smiling at his own story, "I was getting dropped off to deliver supplies to some South Vietnamese troops. The pilot sets me down in this little field and the second we land, the guys on the ground start jumping up and down, yelling and doing this"—he repeats RP's signature movement—"you know, 'boom.' Turns out, I was standing in a minefield."

This was the point in the story where I would raise my eyebrows in surprise.

"I try to get back on the chopper," he went on, "but the S0B pilot has also put together what's going on, and he takes off."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I couldn't stay out there in the open, it was getting dark. They're all just watching me, the South Vietnamese guys." He crossed his arms. "So, I take out a cigar, light it, and walk out of the minefield."

I scoffed in disbelief and delivered the wows like it was the first time I'd heard it. Dad had even included the story in his letter to the VA requesting compensation for his PTSD and asked me to look over the whole thing for spelling and grammar. I was sixteen at the time.

Every time he told it, at this point, a shadow passed over his face. "The pilot came back to pick me up the next day and I told him I'd rather walk. I guess I can't blame him for abandoning me in a mine field, but I do. I hitchhiked back."

The story was finished but Dad lingered, looking at something on the ground and scratching his face in thought. "They all figured I was some kind of man of steel, those guys." He chuckled on his way past me towards the fire.

No matter how many times he told us that story, he always left

out what he'd admitted to the VA in that letter: "I still wake up shivering from that one."

He stopped about halfway down the path and turned. "You comin'?"

By about the third day of being in the mountains, it was time for a resupply. Most of the grandkids went with my mom and sister to get the Amish Coffeecake and sage sausage in Grantsville, plus a stop at the candy store. My husband and older brothers had driven to Morgantown for lumber to install the cabin's new stairs.

I stayed behind to get RP down for an overdue nap, then busied myself tidying the front yard, clearing away random tools, old juice boxes and the damp, discarded clothing that I found everywhere—were any of the children wearing clothes? I gathered the towels littered around the concrete pool and began folding. The jumbled terrycloth carried the sun-warmed scent of uncut grass and campfire that was Maryland.

I loved the quiet moments here more than anything, this rare off-the-grid place that allowed me—perhaps forced me—to be nowhere else. The trees were the same trees my father and uncles had climbed; my great-grandfather's feet walked through this same grass. The valley enveloped me with a sense of belonging.

"Hello there, Sugar Wee," Dad said, coming out of the cabin. He held a can of pop in one hand and with the other he batted away a loose slab of insulation hanging above the door. He walked slowly towards the wooden bench out by the road, stopping to give me a squeeze around the shoulders. The uneven ground hurt his leg, and with that chunk of metal wreathed in scar tissue, he did a lot of groaning when he moved around. It wasn't unusual for me to see him stiff-backed in his chair at one or two in the morning when I came in from having campfire

beers. He took Vicodin when he was in Maryland.

My brother-in-law Doug and three nephews came rounding the bend in the road, returning from one of their fishing trips at Youghiogheny Lake just down the road. A little town, Guard, sat at the bottom of it after being flooded by a dam. In dry years, you could see the foundations of old buildings rising out of the stinking mud like crustacean braille. Apparently, it made for good fishing holes. The late morning sun glinted on the poles slung over their shoulders. Their tackleboxes, swinging like pendulums, marked the air with invisible grins to match the boys' happy faces.

Dad didn't greet them. He whirled around and took quick, choppy steps back to the cabin. Every muscle in his face was taut as though holding fast whatever was inside him, threatening to spill out. He disappeared inside and moments later, through one of the loosened tarps, I caught a glimpse of him seated on the second floor, his head in his hands.

When the fireflies came out at dusk, the kids, pockets filled with candy, made their way back to the fire for s'mores. Dad was seated once again on the wooden bench, looking out at the street. I tugged on a jacket and brought his McNaughton-plaid scarf out to him. Even in the summer, valley evenings were cool.

He acknowledged me by scooting over to give me space, though the bench had plenty, and he thanked me for the scarf, which he spread across his lap so that he could rub the edge between his fingers. We sat quietly together. Eventually he spoke, and his words had a soft, rounded edge to them that I wasn't used to.

"You know, my whole life I used to go fishing with my dad. Almost every day when we were here. When I first got to Vietnam and saw the streams out there, I thought about him, how nice it would be to have him fishing with me."

I hardly remembered my grandfather. I used to stare at his waders hanging from the basement ceiling at grandma's house, suspended in the air like some disembodied fisherman, and wonder how someone could wear boots that were taller than I was. No one had the gumption to take them down.

"I didn't like streams so much anymore, after Vietnam," Dad continued. "No cover. And I saw a lot of dead bodies floating in them."

A truck went by with a boat hitched to it. We waved, and the driver raised his hand in casual, relaxed acknowledgement. I studied the rolling gravel disturbed by the heavy tires. I knew the story from dad's VA letter. He had been on the radio and didn't know a VC was creeping up behind him. His platoon sergeant shot the enemy soldier and the body tumbled into the nearby creek bed. *I often remember this young VC floating face down in the water with his hair streaming*, he wrote.

I stayed silent, giving Dad his room to speak. Another car had driven past, this one earning a "Slow down," before he finally said, "When I saw those boys coming down the street with their dad and all their gear, I went upstairs and wept. I just—I don't know. The thought hit me like a ton of bricks: I haven't been fishing in fifty years."

Laughter bounced around the campsite, but the weight of his statement settled heavy in the air between us; the space between his words steeped in grief, some sense of loss he hadn't recognized before and was confronting for the first time.

It made sense: Fishing was being surrounded by nature, waiting for the bite; war was being surrounded by nature, waiting for the bullet. Sitting silently in the outdoors would be torture for him. My mother told me that while hiking along the creek together, early in their marriage, Dad had looked into the dense forest and whispered, "This is a good place for

an ambush.”

Another car drove by, and even though the guy waved, Dad kept his hands folded in his lap. His head was tilted up and his gaze lingered where the sky met the trees. His eyes were glassy.

He'd never hidden that he only showed up at the cabin during our summers out of obligation and that he'd rather be anywhere else. Some years he didn't even come. I didn't know what Dad's childhood there in the mountains looked like and, to my memory, he'd never said a single positive thing about the place, this parcel of land that had been in the family for a century, and never tired of telling us about the time his cousin dunked him in the pool—"I almost drowned!"

But we'd all almost drowned each other in the pool, fought like cats and dogs as children. Hell, a few times even as adults. It didn't stop us from loving the place.

The image of Dad as a little boy fishing with his father rolled around in my thoughts for the rest of the evening. It was like getting a peek at the little town of Guard when the lake was dry—it was still there, had been there our whole lives, but it had been covered over.

I had sometimes wondered what it would be like if he came to the lake with us or dipped his feet in the creek; what it would be like to take a walk with him down the road where the sun peek-a-boomed through the crisscrossed fingers of trees a hundred feet high. Maybe it would release something in him, a cache of fond memories would flood back to him and he'd recaptivate the self that had explored the forests and hiked through the creek, turned up rocks to find salamanders and crayfish. But he didn't do any of these things, and I mourned for an irretrievable part of him that I had never known.

The next morning after his cup of coffee, Dad announced that he was leaving early to beat the traffic. For most of us, packing up meant an hours-long ordeal of haranguing children, overloading trunks and backseats with soggy clothes and rumpled sleeping bags, stuffing cans of bug spray and kitchen pots in odd corners. Dad dipped into the cabin for a few minutes and emerged carrying his red overnight bag in one hand.

A few kids had unzipped from their tents and shuffled around in the grass waiting for their cousins to wake up. He kissed their heads on the way to his truck and placed the crisp-looking bag in the spacious, empty backseat. It seemed lonely there. I wondered if he'd think about fishing on his way home, or the things that kept him from fishing. With the driver side door open, he raised his hand in a generic wave to anyone in the vicinity, then started up the truck and drove away.