Fourth of July audiobook scripts

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The Parade Comes Down Main

Small-town summer fiction · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Fourth of July parade in Cutter's Mill was nine minutes long, and people set out their lawn chairs for it two days ahead.

You had to know the order. First the fire truck, with the siren that set off every dog in town. Then the high school band, down to fourteen members and playing like forty. Then the tractors. Then old Hollis Baird in his convertible, waving to both sides of the street.

"Is that all of it?" asked the girl beside me. She was new, here for the summer with her aunt.

"That's the first time around."

"The first?"

"Main Street's only four blocks. They turn at the feed store and come back."

She laughed, and I decided right there to say the next thing before I lost my nerve. "It's better the second time. You know who to wave at." I shifted my chair over six inches. "I could point them out."

Third Blanket from the Left

Coming-of-age · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The summer I was sixteen, I watched the fireworks from my own blanket for the first time, and I understood that something was ending.

Every year before that I had sat with my parents. Third blanket from the left, by the ball field fence, with the cooler and the bug spray and my dad saying "Here we go" at every single rocket.

That year I was thirty yards away with Carmen and Josie and a boy named Theo who had not yet said one word to me.

The first shell went up. Gold, the kind that hangs and drips. And over the boom, clear across the field, I heard it. "Here we go!"

Carmen groaned. "Is that your dad?"

"No," I said. Then, "Yeah."

I looked back. I could just see them, my mother's head on his shoulder, a space on the blanket the exact size of me.

I stayed where I was. But I waved. And he waved back, like he'd been watching for it all along.

The Bell Ringer's Daughter

Historical fiction, 1776 · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The rider came into Ashby Ford on a lathered horse in July of 1776, and Temperance Wade was the first to see that he was smiling.

She was fourteen, and she had the keys to the meetinghouse because her father, who rang the bell, was laid up with his back.

"Where's your bell ringer, girl?" the rider called.

"Abed, sir. I ring it."

"Then ring it now. Ring it till your arms give out."

"For a fire?"

"For news. They've done it, in Philadelphia. Declared us free and independent, the whole thirteen." He laughed, and it cracked in the middle. "Go on!"

She ran. The rope was heavier than it looked from below, and the first pull lifted her clean off her feet. Doors opened. She saw her mother come out with flour on her hands, and old Mr. Garrow, who had said it would never happen, standing in the road with his hat off.

Temperance did not yet know what it would cost. She only knew to keep pulling.

Uncle Ray's Brisket

Memoir, family cookout · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

My Uncle Ray started the Fourth of July brisket at four in the morning on the third, and God help the man who lifted the lid.

I was twelve the year he let me sit up with it. We had two lawn chairs, a thermos, and a radio turned so low it was mostly static.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"For how long?"

"Fourteen hours, give or take."

"Uncle Ray, that's not cooking. That's waiting."

He thought that over, which was something he did with his whole face. "Son, most of what's worth anything is waiting. Brisket. Fishing. Your aunt Lucille." He poked the coals. "You just got to do it on purpose."

Around sunrise I fell asleep in the chair. I woke up with his jacket over me, and the whole yard smelling like something I'd spend thirty years trying to copy.

I've got his smoker now. I've never once got it right. But I sit up with it.

Home by the Fourth

Contemporary fiction, homecoming · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Sergeant Marcus Bell got off the bus in Tully at noon on the Fourth of July, two days early, and found the whole town with its back to him.

They were watching the parade. He stood at the corner with his duffel on his shoulder and saw the fire truck go by, and the scouts, and a banner on the bank that said WELCOME HOME MARCUS, SATURDAY.

He nearly laughed. He had wanted to slip in quietly. All he had pictured, the whole flight back, was his mother's porch and nobody talking.

"Excuse me," said a small voice. A boy of about six was looking up at him, holding a paper flag. "You're in the way of the tubas."

"Sorry, buddy."

"Are you in the parade?"

"No."

"You've got the clothes for it."

The boy studied him, the uniform, the bag, and then looked over at the banner, sounding out the words. His eyes got very wide. "Are you Saturday?"

Marcus crouched down. His knee complained. "I'm early," he said. "Can you keep a secret for about one more minute?"

"No," the boy said honestly, and turned around, and yelled it.

His mother told him later that she heard his name go down Main Street like a string of firecrackers, block by block. All he remembered was the tubas stopping. And then her, coming through the crowd with her hands already out, not running, because she never ran, but walking very, very fast.

Penny and the Biggest Drum

Children's, picture book · Any · Neutral American · 45 seconds

Penny was the smallest drummer in the whole Fourth of July parade, and she had been given the biggest drum.

It was so big she could not see over it. She could only see drum, and her own two shoes.

"Just follow the tuba," said Mr. Ortiz, the band teacher. "Left, right, boom."

Left, right, boom. Left, right, boom. Penny marched past the bakery. She marched past the library. She marched, although she did not know it, straight on when the tuba turned the corner.

The crowd went quiet. Then somebody started to clap in time. Left, right, boom.

And the whole parade, tuba and all, turned around and followed Penny.

The Annual Burning of Dale's Lawn

Comic essay · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Every Fourth of July, my neighbor Dale puts on a fireworks show, and every fifth of July, Dale reseeds his lawn.

I want to be fair to Dale. He prepares. He has a clipboard. He has a bucket of water that he places, each year, slightly too far away. He has safety goggles, which he wears on top of his head.

"Stand back, folks," Dale announces at dusk, to nine adults already standing in the next yard.

The first one is always perfect. A clean whistle, a red bloom, the children gasp. This is what keeps him going. Because the second one, every year, falls over.

"That's fine," says Dale, as it skitters under the hydrangeas. "That's part of it."

"Dale," says his wife, Connie, not looking up from her lawn chair.

"I see it, Connie."

"The mulch, Dale."

"I see the mulch."

He does not need the bucket. Connie has had the hose in her lap since seven o'clock. It is, she says, her favorite holiday.

Dock Lights on Tamarack Lake

Lake-house novel · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Hadley sisters had not been at the lake house together in eleven years, and by the afternoon of the Fourth they had already fought about the canoe.

"Mom left it to both of us," Ruth said.

"Mom left everything to both of us. That was her whole strategy." Joanna dropped the paddles on the dock. "She thought if we had to share a boat, we'd have to talk."

"Well. Here we are, talking."

"This is shouting, Ruthie. It carries on water."

Across the lake, someone was stringing lights on a pontoon. A screen door slapped. The same sounds, exactly, as when they were nine and twelve and not allowed past the raft.

Ruth sat down on the edge of the dock and put her feet in. After a minute, so did Joanna.

"She'd have hated the new people's dock," Joanna said.

"The floodlights? She'd have written a letter."

"She'd have written two." And there it was, small and sudden as a fish rising, the first laugh.

The Year of the Sparklers

Memoir · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

The year I was five, my grandmother handed me a lit sparkler and said, "Write your name before it goes out."

I didn't know how to spell it yet. So I drew a circle, and then a bigger one, and the light stayed in the air a half second behind my hand.

"That's not a name," my cousin said.

"It is so," said my grandmother. "That's exactly who she is."

I have signed a lot of things since. None of them as well.

A Musket by the Door

Historical fiction, 1775 · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

My husband hung his musket above the door in the spring of 1775, and I did not ask him to take it down, because I knew I would not like the answer.

We kept a small farm. Forty acres, one ox, a great many stones. Josiah Hartwell had never raised his voice to a neighbor.

"It may come to nothing, Prudence," he said.

"Then why is it loaded?"

He had no answer. He went on mending the harness, and I went on with the bread, and the thing hung there between us saying what neither of us would.

When they came for him, it was a boy who knocked. Out of breath. Josiah was through the door before I had my hands out of the dough.

Potato Salad Diplomacy

Comic essay · Adult (30-45) · Midwestern US · 30 seconds

There are two potato salads at every family cookout, and you are expected to take both. One is Aunt Deb's. It has mustard. One is Aunt Bev's. It has opinions about mustard. They sit at opposite ends of the table like rival embassies. Each aunt watches your plate. You take a spoonful of the first, a spoonful of the second, exactly equal, and you say, loudly, "I could never choose."

This is not cowardice. This is how the family has stayed together since 1989.

The Dog Who Hated the Fourth

Children's, family story · Any · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Biscuit was not afraid of the mailman, the vacuum, or the big dog on the corner. Biscuit was afraid of exactly one night a year.

At the first boom she went under the bed. At the second she tried to go under the floor. So Eli took his pillow and his flashlight and crawled in after her. "It's just loud sky," he whispered. "I don't like it either."

They stayed there the whole show. Eli says it was the best Fourth he ever had.

The Pie Contest Verdict

Small-town summer fiction · Adult (40-55) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

For twenty-six straight years, Gladys Schmitt's cherry pie had won the blue ribbon at the Independence Day picnic, and this year the judges had a problem.

"It's not the best one," whispered Pastor Mike.

"Keep your voice down."

"Number seven is better, Harriet. It's not close. Who made number seven?"

Harriet Olson checked her card and went pale. "Gladys's granddaughter. She's eleven."

The two judges looked across the picnic grounds. Gladys sat in her usual chair under the elm, hands folded, already wearing the expression of a woman prepared to be modest.

"We can't," said the pastor.

"We took an oath. On a pie server."

"She taught that child everything."

"Then she taught her too well."

They were still arguing when Gladys herself appeared at the table, picked up a clean fork, and took one bite of number seven. She chewed for a long time.

"Well, give it to her," she said. "And somebody tell her she's using my lard, and I want it back."

What the Printer Read Aloud

Historical fiction, 1776 · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

In July of 1776, in the river town of Weller's Landing, the only man who could read aloud without stumbling was the printer, Enoch Varley, and so it fell to him.

The sheet had come up from Philadelphia by post rider, already soft from handling. Enoch stood on a barrel outside his shop with half the town below him. Farmers, mostly. The cooper. The widow Sprague, who took in washing and trusted no one.

He read it through, slowly, the way he set type. When he finished, nobody cheered. That is the part the stories leave out. There was a silence, and in it you could hear the river.

"Read the end again," said the cooper, Amos Tench. "Where they pledge."

Enoch found the place. Their lives, he said. Their fortunes. Their honor. All of it promised, each man to the others.

"Lives," said Amos. "That's plain enough."

"And who's 'they'?" called the widow Sprague. "Fine gentlemen in a hall. What's it to do with us?"

Enoch looked down at the paper, and then at his own hands, black to the wrist with ink, as they had been every day for thirty years.

"I'd say it has to do with whoever prints it, Mistress Sprague. And whoever reads it. And whoever stands here and hears it and doesn't walk off." He folded the sheet. "You're still standing here."

She sniffed. But she did not walk off. And one by one, beginning at the back, the men of Weller's Landing took off their hats.

Night Swim, Fourth of July

Lake-house novel, romance · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

We swam out to the raft to watch the fireworks, and that is the only reason I ever learned Jack Halloran was afraid of the dark.

Not the sky. The water. He lay flat on the boards with his arms spread, like someone holding on to a roof.

"There's nothing down there," I said.

"There's a whole lake down there, Wren."

"You've lived on it your entire life."

"On it. That's my point."

The first rocket went up from the town beach and opened green over the trees, and its twin opened underneath us, in the black water, just as bright.

"Oh," Jack said, very quietly. And he let go of the boards, and found my hand instead.

Grandpa Folds the Flag

Literary fiction, family · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

At sundown on the Fourth, my grandfather took the flag down from the porch, and that was the year he asked me to hold the other end.

He never said much about the Navy. Two years, a ship, some places. That was all we got. But he folded that flag the same way every evening, and he did not like it rushed.

"Keep it taut," he said. "Don't let it touch."

"I've got it."

"Lengthwise first. Now again. Now bring your corner to me."

Triangle over triangle, we walked toward each other across the porch. I was fifteen and embarrassed by everything, and I remember thinking how small the thing got, and how heavy.

At the end he tucked the last edge in and held it against his chest a second longer than he needed to.

"Who taught you?" I asked.

"A fellow named Whit." He looked out at the yard. "Good with knots. Terrible at cards."

It was the most he ever told me. I knew enough not to ask for more.

The Lemonade Stand War

Middle-grade · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On the morning of the Fourth of July, there were two lemonade stands on Birch Street, and only one of them was supposed to be there.

Mine had been on that corner for three summers. It had a sign. It had a loyal customer base, meaning my grandma and the mail carrier.

The new one was right across the street. It had a tablecloth.

"Fifty cents," said the kid behind it. Her name was Odessa, and she had moved in on Tuesday. "With ice."

"Mine's fifty cents."

"Mine has mint."

I marched back and crossed out my price. Forty. She crossed out hers. Thirty. By ten o'clock we were both paying people a nickel to take a cup.

Then the parade crowd came around the corner, about two hundred of them, hot and thirsty, and we each had one pitcher left.

Odessa looked at me. I looked at Odessa.

"A dollar," she said.

"Each," I said, and carried my table across the street.

Rooftop, Ninth Street

Coming-of-age · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

You could not see the fireworks from our apartment, so every Fourth of July my mother carried two kitchen chairs up six flights to the roof.

The whole building came. Somebody brought a radio. Somebody brought rice in a pot big enough to bathe in.

I was seventeen and leaving in August, and I acted bored.

Then the sky over the river went white, and I saw my mother's face, turned up, lit like a girl's. I have been homesick for that roof ever since.

Six Hundred Pancakes

Small-town summer fiction · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

The volunteer fire department has served a pancake breakfast every Fourth of July since before I joined, and I have been on the griddle for thirty-one of them.

You learn things about a town at a griddle. Who takes four and says it's for the kids. Who slips a twenty in the boot and won't be thanked.

This year a young fellow came through the line, new to the county, and asked what the money was for.

"The truck," I said. "The hoses. Mostly the truck."

"And what do I get?"

"Three pancakes and a sausage."

"No, I mean for giving."

I flipped two and thought about it. "Well," I said, "if your kitchen ever catches fire, everybody in this room comes running. I'd call that a pretty fair breakfast."

One Year On, July 1777

Historical fiction, 1777 · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

A year to the day after they declared it, the village of Marrow Creek lit a bonfire on the green, and I went, though I had no heart for it.

My son Nathaniel had been gone with the militia since the autumn. Two letters in ten months. I could not see what there was to celebrate in a thing not yet won.

"You came, Widow Ames," said the blacksmith, Silas Croft, making room for me.

"I came to see who else was fool enough."

"Most of us, by the look."

They had no cannon to fire, so the boys beat on kettles. The fiddler played, badly, and the young ones danced.

"It's early for this," I said. "We may yet lose."

"We may." Silas watched the sparks go up. "My father used to say you don't plant an orchard for the apples. You plant it so somebody will have apples."

I thought of Nathaniel. And I stayed until the fire burned down, which was longer than I had meant to.

Fireflies Before the Fireworks

Literary fiction · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 30 seconds

The fireworks never started till full dark, so every Fourth of July my sister and I had one long hour to fill, and we filled it with fireflies.

We caught them in a jelly jar. We counted them. We let them go before the first rocket, because Mama said nothing ought to be shut up on Independence Day.

I am fifty-three. I still count them. And I still think the hour before was the better show.

Forty-One Blueberries

Comic essay · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Every Fourth of July, my mother-in-law makes a cake that looks like the flag, and every year she asks me to bring the blueberries.

This is a test. There must be enough for fifty stars. I have counted. She has counted.

Last year my son ate nine on the drive over. We arrived with forty-one.

She looked at the bowl. She looked at me. "Well," she said, "we'll call it an older flag."

Watermelon Seed Champion

Middle-grade · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

I have been the watermelon seed spitting champion of the Marino family reunion for three years running, and this Fourth of July my title was in danger.

Her name was Great-Aunt Dot. She was eighty-four. She had flown in from Tucson.

"Eleven feet," said my cousin, measuring mine.

"Not bad," said Great-Aunt Dot. She took out her top teeth, handed them to my uncle, and leaned back.

Nobody breathed. The seed went over the picnic table. It went over the cooler. It hit the side of the garage with a tiny click.

"Nineteen fifty-eight county fair," she said, putting her teeth back in. "You never forget."

I shook her hand. A champion knows when she's beaten.

The Tavern Keeper's Sign

Historical fiction, 1776 · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

For twenty years the sign over my door read The King's Arms, and in the summer of 1776 I climbed a ladder and painted it out myself.

I am no firebrand. I keep a tavern. I have poured for soldiers and for the men who cursed them, often in the same evening, and I took coin from both.

"What will you call it now, Mr. Pettibone?" my wife asked from the foot of the ladder.

"I haven't the least idea, Hester."

"You can't have a tavern with no name."

"I can for a week." I came down with paint to my elbows. "We'll see what the country calls itself. Then I'll know what to call the house."

The Cabin Rule

Lake-house novel · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

There was one rule at the Lindgren cabin, painted on a board above the door by a grandfather none of them had met: Nobody Leaves Before the Fireworks.

"It's not a legal document," said Kate. She had her car keys out. She had not spoken to her brother since breakfast.

"It's a little bit a legal document," said her daughter, Maisie, who was nine. "And Uncle Pete said sorry. I heard him."

"He said 'sorry you feel that way.' That's a different thing."

"Is it worse?"

"It's much worse."

Maisie considered the sign. Then she considered her mother. "You could stay and be mad," she offered. "The rule doesn't say you have to be nice. It just says you have to be here."

Kate looked at the board, at seventy years of flaking paint. Down at the dock, Pete was untangling the same fishing line he'd been untangling since 1994.

She put the keys in her pocket. "Fine," she said. "But I'm being mad from the porch."

Stuck at the Top

Coming-of-age, romance · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Ferris wheel at the county fair broke down at nine fifteen on the Fourth of July, with me at the very top and Dani Reyes in the seat beside me.

I had been trying to talk to Dani Reyes since March.

"It does this," she said. "My cousin runs it. Twenty minutes, tops."

"Great," I said. "Good. That's fine." My hands were welded to the bar.

"You're scared of heights."

"I'm aware of heights."

"Then why'd you get on?"

There was no good answer to that except the true one, so I looked at my shoes. Down below, the midway was all bulbs and fried dough, and out past the grandstand the first rocket went up and opened level with us. Not above. Right there, close enough to feel.

"Oh," I said.

"Best seat in the county," Dani said. "My cousin's very good at breaking down." She let that sit a second. "I asked him to."

First Fourth on Alder Court

Contemporary fiction · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Adeyemis had lived on Alder Court for eleven days when the invitation came under the door, handwritten, with a drawing of a hot dog.

"Block party," Ada read aloud. "Fourth of July. Bring a dish and a chair."

"What dish?" said her husband.

"It doesn't say."

"It must say. There is always a correct dish, Ada."

They stood in the kitchen among the boxes. In the end she made what her mother would have made, a great pot of jollof rice, red and fragrant, and carried it down the street feeling like a woman bringing an umbrella to a wedding.

The table was all pale things. Potato salad. Rolls. A bowl of something with marshmallows.

A man in an apron lifted her lid and stood very still.

"Folks," he called over his shoulder, "get over here." And then, to Ada, quite seriously, "Ma'am, I'm Rich, I'm at number six, and I'm going to need you to come to every one of these."

The Town Band Plays in the Rain

Small-town summer fiction · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

It has rained on the Fourth of July concert in Bell Prairie exactly once in my lifetime, and that is the one everybody remembers.

I play second trombone. We were four bars into the opening march when the sky just let go.

"Keep playing," said our conductor, Mr. Vance.

"Mr. Vance, the music's dissolving."

"Then play what you remember."

What we remembered, it turned out, was not the same thing. The clarinets went one way. The tubas, God love them, held a single note and hoped. Mr. Vance conducted with his eyes shut and water running off his nose.

I figured the crowd would run for the cars. Nobody moved. They put their lawn chairs over their heads like hats. And when we got to the end, or to several ends, they stood up in the mud and cheered as if we'd done it on purpose.

"Again," somebody yelled.

"We can't," said Mr. Vance. "We don't know what we played."

Marrieds Versus Singles

Memoir, small town · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

Every Fourth of July in Pickett Springs, the married men played the single men at softball, and the summer I was twenty-four I was the last single man who could hit.

We were down by one in the ninth. Two outs. And the pitcher was Daddy.

"You going to swing this time, son, or just admire it?"

"Throw the ball, old man."

"Your mama's watching."

"Then throw it nice."

He threw it nice. I'd like that on the record. I put it over the fence into Mrs. Tate's tomatoes, and I was halfway to second, arms up, when I saw who was sitting next to Mama in the bleachers.

Lila Graham. Home from nursing school. Clapping.

I missed second base. I flat ran past it. Had to go back and touch it while eleven married men hollered advice.

"Take a good look at that side of the field," Daddy said when I came around third. "You won't be on it next year."

I wasn't.

The Last Summer at Heron Point

Lake-house novel, family · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

We sold the house at Heron Point in the spring, and my father asked for one thing in the contract: the Fourth of July.

So there we were, the two of us, on a dock that already belonged to somebody else. He had brought the old folding chairs. He had brought the thermos, although neither of us had drunk from it in years.

"The Petersons are doing their show early," he said.

"The Petersons moved, Dad. That's their son."

"Is it? He's got the same bad aim."

A rocket went sideways over the cove and we both ducked, out of habit, and laughed.

I had a speech ready. How the taxes were too much, how the stairs were too steep for him now, how a house is only a house.

"You're going to tell me it's only a house," he said.

"I was working up to it."

"It is only a house. I built half of it wrong." He nodded at the water. "That's not what I'll miss."

"What, then?"

He took his time. Across the lake, the big show had started, gold on gold.

"Forty summers," he said, "your mother sat right where you are and said the same thing at the end. 'Well, Jim, that's another one.' I never once answered her. I thought there'd always be another one to answer."

The last shell went up and came down in pieces. The lake went dark and quiet.

"Well, Dad," I said. "That's another one."

"Yes," he said. "It was."

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