

Parade Life

by Kate Farrell

For as long as I can remember, my father has assured me that the Fourth of July parade in our hometown is a celebration of my birthday, one day early. I am ten and stand breathless on the curb of our main street, watching our high school marching band play.

Dad puts a flag in my hand and says, “Don’t forget to thank them!” He’s swallowed into a circle of neighbors who slap him on the back and laugh about stories I can’t hear.

The majorette tosses her baton in the air, blows her whistle, then points right at me when she catches it. I wave my flag and am thrilled to have a summer birthday.

Dad can do anything. He leads the congregation in song every week at the ten o’clock Mass. He’s never off-key. He gets a perfect score when he and I do “How to Increase your Word Power” as soon as the *Reader’s Digest* arrives. I believe him when he tells me freckles are a sign of beauty and when he was disappointed in me when I took five puffs of a Virginia Slims 100 with my cousin.

The day is a scorcher and my armpits are stinky as I keep my right hand up to wave my flag, this time to the World War II veterans. They are fathers and grandfathers from the neighborhood all dressed up in boots, medals, and uniforms that look itchy. Their legs march high but their faces are sad and their eyes look at something I can’t see. I don’t ever want eyes like that.

I wonder how dad arranged all of this. He has three jobs and eight siblings who visit and drink whiskey so hard sometimes they can’t walk to their cars. He also has eight kids, including me, and a dog we inherited when Mom’s dad died. That was around Christmas. My sister told me the news but it didn’t seem real, so I laughed. She told me to be respectful and slapped me as hard as Mom would have. My face held the sting of her fingers even when the red mark disappeared.

I'm tired of waving and thanking those marching in the parade but I can't stop even though vendors are selling hot dogs and potato chips in the park behind me. I see my siblings eating cupcakes but I can't abandon my very own parade.

The marching band from Chester arrives with drums and horns and fire batons, white boots with tassels, and rhythm that makes me bounce like I don't have control of my body. The music somehow races under my blue holiday shorts and white top that each of my four sisters have worn every Fourth of July before this one. I bounce. I jump. I scream "thank you" so loudly that one band lady looks scared of me.

The car with Miss Norwood slinks by like a giant snake. I don't want to wave to the beauty queen even though she wears a pink sparkly gown and her hair lands in a flip topped off with a diamond crown. Someone told me she kissed my brother. He's only fourteen. He's an altar boy and a football player. He delivers newspapers before school and he helps me with my homework. He doesn't have time for fancy girls.

Mom stands beside me and makes a fuss about the beauty queen. I want to tell her about the kiss but Billy is her favorite and it would break her heart. Anyway, I'm not a tattletale. I wave especially hard and scream "thank you" at least five times. Mom asks if I'm all right. I say, "I'm really tired from thanking the whole town for coming out."

Mom takes a long drag of her cigarette. She looks like movie star. She puts her arm around my shoulders and says, "Honey, you can't believe everything your father tells you."

I look at my red sneakers to disagree and don't see the boy scout until he hands me a lit sparkler. I shake my happy birthday sparkler so close to me that I might blind myself. I do it until the flame burns out. Mom isn't looking at me anymore. She's gazing inside the stroller at our new baby who still takes bottles and has a birthday in April when there are no parades.



Kate Farrell has published personal essays in *HerStry* and *Pigeon Pages*, and is currently writing an Olympic murder mystery riffing on her Emmy Award winning career in Sports TV. She has executive produced reality and scripted TV during her time at AMC networks.