

And That's the Way it Was

By Bill Gurnon

Oh, oh.

East Bridgewater, Massachusetts 1957. I'm in the 5th grade and it's movie time. I always loved movies in school. It meant that, when the lights went out, you could do stuff and not get caught. I never actually did stuff to get caught with, but it was fun thinking that I could. There was a feeling of freedom when those lights went out. And for a pre-adolescent in the 5th grade, that was big.

And so it was when it came time for us to watch an episode of Walter Cronkite's "You Are There." Walter would tell us about a day in history, describing it (with the aid of actors acting out the scenes) in such great detail that you'd feel like you really were there. We all had to gather in the assembly room - a large room with dark shades drawn and rows of wooden chairs, all with wooden seats and wooden slats on the back. I sat towards the back of the room, like always. You have more freedom to do stuff in the dark when you sit in back.

So the lights go out and the movie starts and Walter starts talking about that day in history when the Declaration of Independence was signed. And I sit back in my wooden chair and promptly slide my elbow through the wooden slats on the back. I try to pull it out and it won't budge. Oh, oh. That's weird. It went in so easily. Maybe if I just twist it a bit. Nope. It's stuck. Oh, great. Now what?

So here I am, stuck to the back of my chair trying to watch my 2nd favorite person on TV, Walter Cronkite (the Lone Ranger was my 1st favorite). Walter's going on about the people at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And I really want to watch. But I'm too busy twisting and pulling my arm trying to extricate my elbow from the back of my chair. No matter how hard I pull and no matter which direction I pull in, it won't budge. I start getting sweaty and nervous.



What if I'm caught? What if the lights come on and all the kids stand up and I don't 'cause I'm stuck in the stupid chair? What if my favorite teacher (and first crush of my entire life), Miss Sawyer sees me? I loved Miss Sawyer. I can't be seen like this, looking like an idiot who stuck his elbow in his stupid chair. I'm such a dope!

And, what if the lights come on and I'm still stuck and they have to call the janitor to get me out; or worse yet, even the fire department? I can see it all now. All the kids are standing around laughing at me while the fire fighters, decked out in full fire-fighting gear, come running into the room pulling loaded fire hoses behind them ready to combat the worst eventuality. And then there's Miss Sawyer, standing on the sidelines just watching, an expression of huge disappointment on her face. And if that's not enough, when my dad finds out he is gonna be sooooo mad. He'll kill me, for sure.

I twist and pull some more. Um, um, um! It's really starting to hurt a lot. Still nothing. Walter is starting to wrap it up. He's telling us that the document has been signed and everyone is congratulating each other. Pull and twist, twist and pull. Um, um, um! Ouch, ouch, ouch! I'm gonna get out of this no matter what I break in the process. Walter says, "And that's the way it was . . ." and with every ounce of strength I have left, I grit my teeth and give one final yank and POW! My elbow comes free just as the lights come on.

Nobody ever knew what happened, least of all Miss Sawyer. Somehow, movies have never been quite the same.