

**A Close Call
Life Experience
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A Close Call

I am a big believer in the counterbalancing forces of nature, even as they apply to us on an individual level. The yin and the yang, the dark and the light, and the smart and the stupid.

That last one is important. As I look back on my youth, I see a guy who made good decisions—working hard, thinking ahead and trying to improve my skills—professional and social. But there was one moment when I had to question myself, a situation I couldn't really blame on anyone but me.

The incident occurred on Halloween night of 1971, when I was 15 years old. I was a few weeks shy of the legal age for driving, but some of my friends were 16 and had their own wheels.

Two of them, John and Randy, picked me up for an evening of mischief. They were both reasonably smart guys and rarely did anything more than talk a good story about the bad things they would do. So, I was surprised when I got into the back seat of John's car.

"Be careful back there," Randy said. "You don't want to step on those things."

"What things?"

"Oh, we made some bombs. We're going to blow up some garbage cans."

That was when I should have made it an early evening, begging off and heading home. We were a fairly well-known trio around town, and it sounded like I might need an alibi before the night was over. If John and Randy were caught, I could become their codefendant—guilty by association, I suppose, so I needed someone who could verify my whereabouts.

But I didn't go home. I'd like to think I let myself be influenced by peer pressure, but there really wasn't any. The truth is I thought it might be a load of fun to blow up a few trash cans in the back allies of our city.

We'd always been good kids, to the point of being boring. Maybe it was time to explore our darker impulses. Even the heroes on our favorite TV shows had a bit of rogue in them, so why not us?

Of course, on television the heroes typically went through the wringer before everything worked out in the wash. As long as we came out of the evening clean, we were just going to have a night of harmless fun.

Before that, however, we needed to gas up the car, and we stopped at a downtown filling station. That's when our plan quickly derailed. A local police officer on foot patrol happened to be John's next-door neighbor, and he recognized the car. He approached us just to be friendly, later telling us it was a complete joke when he shined his flashlight into the car.

"What have you guys got going on in here?" he asked with a smile that disappeared as soon as he saw the two boxes of bottles with fuses. "Aw, damn it! Now, I'm going to have to take you in. I should have known it wouldn't be a nice quiet night."

Since he was walking, the officer instructed us to meet him at the police station. We weren't going to get far if we ran in our small community, so we glumly complied. Better to limit the damages we'd already done to our lives. Being the naïve teenagers that we were, we were already wondering what it would be like in juvenile detention. The images were not pretty.

With the station only a block away, we were soon sitting before a desk sergeant. He sternly explained that each of us would be questioned separately by two detectives and gave us an unnecessarily evil grin that made certain we knew the interrogation would be one of the worst experiences of our young lives.

Detectives? I didn't know much then, but I knew if detectives were involved things were about to take a very bad turn. They took on only serious cases, after all. They wore suits and carried their guns out of sight in shoulder holsters inside their jackets, but everyone understood they were armed and dangerous.

One of the detectives approached us, pointed at Randy and motioned for him to enter the interrogation room. It wasn't quite "dead man walking!" but Randy shuffled through the door with his head hanging low.

It seemed like an hour before he returned, but it probably was 10 minutes. The detective led Randy to his seat and motioned for John to follow him. As they walked away, he stopped and spoke to the desk sergeant as he pointed at Randy and me.

"Make sure these two guys don't talk."

Oh, crap, they were ratcheting things up now. My mind was a whirlwind as I considered how I could make the best of a situation that was getting worse by the minute. Maybe I could cop a plea? Probation wouldn't be so bad, I thought. But I couldn't rat out my friends—that would violate the criminal's code of honor.

John returned, looking like a shell of the energetic teenager he'd been at the start of the evening. He didn't look at me; he looked through me at his bleak future. Life as he'd known it was done.

I scuffed toward the interrogation room with the detective just off my right shoulder. As soon as I entered, I made eye contact with the other detective, who sat behind a table and shook his head solemnly. Perhaps he was only conveying that he didn't like being part of the mess I'd help create, but he had to do his duty.

It didn't really matter—I knew I'd never be the same again. I'd soon be doing hard time, living with people who were about my age but likely could frighten me by squinting in my direction. How would I survive as a ward of the state? Would I have to join a gang to have some protection? Would I have to shiv someone to earn my stripes?

As I stared at the detective across the table from me, the other placed his right foot on a chair. With a nod from his seated partner, he began.

“So, from what your two friends said, you didn't know anything about the bombs until you got in the car just a few minutes before the officer found them,” he said.

“They said that? Well, it's true.” I was stunned.

“Okay, then. We're going to hold your friends for their parents, but we're going to let you go. But you better go straight home, because if we see you anywhere else, we might just change our minds about going easy on you.”

“No problem. I'm going to run all the way, and I'm going to be in for the night. You might not see me again until next year.”

I was on the track and cross-country teams, but I think I ran my personal best for the mile in getting home. Of course, my parents were surprised to see me home so early, so I had to tell them the truth. They weren't happy with my news, but they simply expressed their hope that I had learned my lesson.

No doubt about it, I assured them. The lesson was reinforced over the next few days. First, a story in the local paper alerted the world that three youths were "...Arrested with Bombs." The story didn't identify us because of our ages, but somehow everyone at school knew those three youths were John, Randy and me. We caught a lot of grief over the next few days. In a small town, you're not off the gossip hook until someone else screws up to take your place.

Then, the next day we ran into the arresting officer. He was cordial, but he thought we should know the police detonated one of the bombs at their rifle range.

"Blew a coffee can a hundred feet in the air," he said, following it up with a whistle of amazement.

I suspected that was an exaggeration, but I wasn't about to say so. Thanks to honest friends and kind police detectives, I had figuratively dodged a bullet.

More than 50 years later, I recall that night in great detail. I wish I could say not getting out of the car was the last stupid decision I made, but at least there haven't been very many—certainly none of that potential magnitude.

I know how close I came to wrecking my life, and I don't want to take any chances. In all the time that has passed, I haven't put a match to anything more explosive than a Fourth-of-July sparkler. And I glance over my shoulder before I do that.

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