

Don't Blow Up the Backyard When the Preacher is Visiting

Once upon a time in another lifetime, there were mischievous boys. Not mean boys or venomous boys, just mischievous, extremely intelligent, and bored out of their minds during late summer boys. If “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop”, maybe this is where the saying started.

Five boys were out of school for the weekend. School had just started back after a long and eventful summer. Every day was another adventure even though they were only days out from the trouble they cooked up this summer with their science experiments from the chemistry sets they had each received as presents last Christmas. Presents received from clueless parents.

I have explained previously in another story how it came to be that the “live five” as I called them had learned from the local library this summer how to make gun powder! In today’s world this would be a real problem as times have changed so much since the early sixties. In fact it hardly resembles the free, imaginative world that I grew up in. Many times I long for those simpler days and the chance to be a creative, imaginative child without being thought of as a menace to society. I’m not saying that we didn’t do some things we probably shouldn’t have done, but in this time period parents ruled with discipline, a good belt, and the fear of God. There was also the “talking to” that was sometimes worse than any imagined spanking.

So the boys had their gunpowder. They tried various things like making their own firecrackers and blowing up plastic soldiers, the ones they hadn’t melted with magnifying glasses, and blowing holes in the ground and exploding things in open culverts. Culverts had a pleasant echo. Most experiments were tried carefully out of earshot of home and parents. Of course these small events were gradually escalating as the boys became bored.

We all know where this is leading. This was destined to happen sooner or later. It was just a little sooner than later.

It was a bright, clear-blue cloudless Sunday afternoon in early Autumn. Leaves had begun their slow dance with mother-nature, but the temperature was still just warm enough. The air was dry and there was a slight southerly breeze today. It was the perfect afternoon. Church was over a couple of hours ago, Grandma served up a meal fit for a king, or as it turned out today, the preacher. Actually because of the preacher’s visit, the kids had been delegated to play outside for a while and try to be on best behaviors.

That statement became short lived as James asked Ronnie, my brother, “what would happen if we put that in a metal pipe?” They had their usual debate over what would happen and seemed to feel the noise would be minimal and the damage almost none existent. To those of you who haven’t been paying attention, this equated to what you hear about today as a pipe bomb.

The kids had a piece of left over pipe from a plumber's recent visit. They proceeded to fill it full of gun powder and sealed it up. I'm not sure if they did anything else or not as playing with gun powder was not my forte until later, but I know they added a fuse and buried it in a hole in the ground partially sticking out. I was beginning to think "boy this ain't gonna be good", but I too was fascinated and glued to the spot. They made James light the fuse. He always got the bad jobs because he was the skinny kid and could run faster.

Five, four, three, two, one . . . kabooooom!!!! "Holy crap" I yelled as the sound reverberated around the block. I was thinking to myself they just might have used a little too much powder. Dirt and metal flew everywhere. The sound was deafening! There was a big push of warm air. Windows rattled all the way down the street and then came my Mother flying out of the house. Grandma, Grandpa, the preacher, neighbors, visiting aunts and uncles and even the dogs! Mother had initially thought the water heater exploded. Then she exploded, all over us! She made more noise than the gun powder. She looked around to make sure no body parts were missing and then she yelled for everybody to "leave now". She added something about "just wait until your parents hear this one" as we were summoned into the house "now"!

It was not a pretty sight when the preacher left. I think she broke a belt on Ronnie's behind. I skated off scott-free with no problem as I was just an innocent bystander. Right. But it worked to my advantage. There was grounding and grounding and more grounding. Ronnie just couldn't make her understand that it was curiosity and he just wanted to see what it would do. That set her off again, but there was only so much yelling she could do. We were sent to our rooms and tomorrow was a school day, so that was a blessing. I think this was the night he thought up the sulfur smoke bomb but that was something else entirely.

Things quieted down in a few days. Neighbors started speaking again and soon the Autumn days turned cool and into Halloween. Thoughts and comments about the pipe bomb in the backyard melted away but the memory survived.

I will never forget those glorious days of total freedom and my love of childhood friends. I can still see the explosion after all these years and every time I do I smile. Not just a turned up corner smile but the big one, like that Cheshire cat. And where ever all the boys have come to be, I still love each and every one of you, pinky swear.

Joyce Burns
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