

HERE IN THE BOXES

By Richard Cahill

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I admit my uncle Gerard took great joy in the manufacture (and detonation) of bombs. Such were our circumstances (poor, unconnected by privilege to ammunition depots or powder magazines, living miles from the state border where powerful fireworks could be purchased legally) that he had to be resourceful while pursuing his hobby. Hence the fertilizer receipts. If I had realized he used them as bookmarks, we wouldn't be talking now. Not that I would ever have concealed anything, because I have nothing to conceal.

We lived in a tiny urban nook in the midst of a vast spread of rural America, the only apartment house for thirty miles in any direction, and a good many more in a few. The whole town consisted of our apartment building, a few scattered and dilapidated houses, a gas station, a post office, and a combination feed and general store.

Myself and my mother slept in one bedroom and Uncle Gerard, who had been installed by the rest of our extended family, after my father's still mysterious disappearance, as a surrogate dad, in the other. I always got the impression that my mother was bullied into going along with this arrangement by her own parents and her sister Arlene. Her family seemed to think that my

growing up without a male figure to model myself after would result in my becoming homosexual upon reaching puberty, although this theory was never articulated out loud, at least while I was around. It had happened, though, to a distant cousin whose father had been lost early in Vietnam, and the unspoken family feeling was that no precaution was too frivolous to keep it from happening again.

Their strategy succeeded, though an appreciation for the pleasure of keeping intimate company with woman was, unfortunately, hardly all that Uncle Gerard passed along to me. I tell you, like I have told the others, that the copy of the Anarchist's Cookbook that was compressed between other disused volumes on my bookshelf was his, though I also tell you honestly that Uncle Gerard had no interest in anarchy, just bombs. I never even dared to take the book out, even to throw it away, after the attacks. That's why it was still there, when the search was made. These are terrible times, and possession, or even disposition, of bomb-making literature makes one automatically suspect. I knew that. I thought I might already be suspect, because I had a friend named Ahmed and one named Hassan. They were both peaceable men, as far as I knew, but I did know they were, or at least had been raised as, Islamics, and I want it plainly noted here that if they turned out to be "sleepers," I had nothing to do with supporting their activities, ever. They were not close friends. I even made up an excuse when Ahmed asked me to cash a small check for him, so that no Arab name would appear in my bank records. That should settle the question of my non-involvement.

Uncle Gerard's bombs were not political. They were expressions of pure pyrotechnic joy. We never bombed anything, not any buildings, anyway. Sometimes we would get our hands on an

old motorless tractor or other piece of discarded farm equipment and push it off the fields into a hollow and rig it for detonation. Uncle Gerard would let me stick a couple of tin film canisters filled with match-heads under the seat while he prepared a bomb for the engine compartment. When the machine went up, in a molten burst of orange flame buzzing with hot bits of rust that often dotted our skins with tiny burns because we had stood too close, Uncle Gerard always assured me he could see the distinct flashes of the match-head bombs, meaning I had contributed to the explosion's success.

Not that I would do anything like that now. I don't even smoke and have no reason to collect matches. I lived in the city and only used fertilizer, small amounts, on some indoor plants I had. Legal plants, if you were thinking otherwise.

Mostly we bombed the meadows and creek beds of our county. My mother worked at a hospital fifteen miles closer to the main town there. I always said she was a nurse but she never claimed to be. The commute could take her anywhere from fifteen to forty-five minutes, depending on how cluttered the highway was with slow-moving harvesters and combines, and the hospital switched her shift around constantly. Uncle Gerard was my daily companion. He never worked; he had achieved the blue-collar nirvana of permanent disability compensation before he was thirty, in a genuine accident. He regarded himself as being lucky as a lottery winner, not suspect as a slacker, although I can see now how he might be a suspect. The guys he had grown up with, who had never left the county either, were still stuck driving truck or running carpentry crews and contemplating giving their bodies' useful lives over to endless repetitive work in the cooking sunshine or the shit-hell cold, and thinking about how big a fall they could take, or how much of

an accident they could fake, so that they could get on top of that disability wagon without becoming actual cripples, were certainly jealous of him, and they are not suspects. But I realize it is not for me to say who is suspect or not.

Uncle Gerard's check came every two weeks; he bought a week's worth of food for the three of us while my mother bought for the odd weeks. He used the extra week's income on beer, supplies for our hobby and, usually, a little bag of reefer. Sometimes Uncle Gerard would go into town and drink at a bar with plywood panels on the walls and a couple go-go girls who would get up on stage if the crowd swelled to a dozen or so. Mostly, though, he smoked and drank while we tinkered with our projects. I can say, despite the drinking, that he was always safety conscious; if he decided he was getting too buzzed to mix or wire, he would instruct me to put the chemicals away and we would just buy a few gallons of gasoline and pour it on a pile of scrap wood, then toss a light in its direction just to hear the *woof* of it igniting. His favorite holiday was July Fourth, though that may well have been because of personal tastes rather than intense patriotism. I doubt he's the person you're looking for. Of course, it is more likely he is the person than I am.

Sometimes we would submerge a bomb in a pond, especially if we had been watching war movies featuring submarines and depth charges. Detonation underwater could be tricky, and there may still be a few small bodies of water in the county with unexploded ordnance in them on our account. Please note I am admitting this freely. You can have my complete cooperation in locating these potentially dangers, if I can remember where any of them are and if they have not been filled in by man or nature, and if you want to.

When the underwater bombs went off they always shot up a geyser that was satisfyingly cinematic, and stunned bass and catfish would float up to the surface of the pond. Bomb-fishing was not our real purpose, but we would scoop up the fish we could reach to provide an excuse for the time spent. I am aware now that this was illegal. I am fairly confident the statute of limitations has expired.

I realize Uncle Gerard disappeared. Like my father. Some people may now think that I have disappeared. Particularly my mother. My mother is still haunted, I think, by the thought that she is a disappearing guy magnet. That phrase does not sound as nearly catchy now as it did when I first made it up. I have no gift for catchy phrases. I think that mitigates towards my innocence, but that is for you to say.

He disappeared long before the attack. I heard years later that it was because of one of the strippers in the wood-paneled bar. He liked her and she was the girlfriend of some dangerous motorcycle guy. So his disappearance would have nothing to do with him going underground, then, or his "cell" going "active," as I have heard it phrased. He had nothing to do with any Moslems-none of us did, we didn't know any. He was a white, raised Christian American.

I realize that made him a perfect recruit for those Al people, if he turns out to be guilty, or alive. Same thing, you say. You have a perfect cynicism that serves you well as an interrogator. I say that without seeking any sympathy for myself. I wouldn't expect you to be befuddled by complements. You are far too much of a professional.

When Uncle Gerard disappeared I abandoned bomb-making, although you should be able to tell from this account that my involvement with my uncle's explosions was peripheral, sometimes, although on others I guess I could be described as some sort of minor assistant, a bat boy to his Barry Bonds. I did shoot a few bottle-rockets at my high school gym's windows while the senior prom was in progress. I was in tenth grade at the time. Who knows what drove me? I was caught and punished, so that it would be double jeopardy for me to be prosecuted again for it. Oh, I see you are angry. I know how you hate legalisms. Forget I said that. Let me rephrase. I realize, now that we have zero tolerance for any explosions in inhabited structures, it would be a felony, but it wasn't then. Fair enough? My family worried at the time that my misdemeanor was a reflection of gay impulse, surfacing inexorably when Uncle Gerard joined my father in the ranks of the disappeared, but they were wrong. It was likely a mere boyish wish to call attention to oneself from a room, actually a gym, full of pretty girls. That it failed miserably as a strategy for romance did not prevent me from developing other strategies, and eventually being happily married for many years. I would be happily married today if it had not turned out that my wife was unhappily married.

I don't want to bore you with this. I realize being gay is not a crime. I just don't want to be accused of it, if it ever becomes one. And if I ever became one, a gay person, that is, I would be circumspect. Circumspectness is our duty to the nation, in these times, but I have nothing to be circumspect about, sexually. I had a girlfriend before I came in here. She may have had other boyfriends. I know I was looking for other girlfriends, but I was looking discreetly, on secure Internet sites. I only mention gayness because we are segregated by sex, here. Some of the other

men have indicated they wish to force gayness upon me. In a friendly way. I am not accusing anybody of anything.

I have not done anything that could be remotely described as criminal since the day of the attacks. I have always supported the Bush Doctrine. I have never violated the Ashcroft Act. I too, am frightened. I am in fear of my life. The fact that I did not go to work that day was because of sickness, not because I knew I might be immolated. I have a doctor's note, dated correctly. It is in my file.

I have never asked for a lawyer, and that is not merely because I do not wish to be moved to the section of the camp reserved for people who have asked for lawyers, or even the section reserved for people who are lawyers. It is because of my relative innocence. I believe my Uncle Gerard is relatively innocent, too. He is just unaware of his innocence because he is missing. He may be dead, and unaware of that as well. If he turns out to be guilty, that is not necessarily a reflection upon me. Everyone whose life a criminal touches is not guilty of a crime, though I agree with you that they are guiltier than those whose lives he hasn't touched.

Everything that I have done wrong is in the past, and should be forgotten, I think, except those things which might have affected the future. Since we don't know the future, I understand why I am kept here until it sorts itself out.

I am not a whiner; I certainly don't want to be put in the section for whiners. I am comfortable here. I am comfortable in detention. The weather is always warm, and my box leaks very little,

even in the downpours. I do not refer to my quarters as a “spider hole,” even though there are spiders. I have heard “monkey cage,” too, but there are definitely no monkeys. I hear the other detainees complaining about detention being indefinite, but I always comfort myself with the thought that indefinite means I could be released tomorrow. Have I done well? Could that happen?

Inscrutability is to your trade as oxygen tanks are to a diver. I know that. Is Uncle Gerard here? Pardon me for thinking you might answer that. I don’t want to have contact with him; that might damage both of our chances to be eventually determined to be innocent enough to leave the camp. I would just like to know if he is alive, and where he went when he disappeared and, just for the sake of narrative continuity, whether his story matches up with mine. You could nod a little if it does.

That is more of a grimace than a nod. But a grimace is nearly a smile, and I am glad you feel like smiling. I do, too. I am always optimistic. I am optimistic that the sun will shine, that the breeze will blow coolly through the slats from the ocean, that the screen will keep the mosquitoes out, although these things do not always happen. But they could happen, just like I could be out of here soon. My mistakes were made when I was young, and under the influence of an older person who was also making mistakes. I realize that when I got older, I was not a perfect citizen. Often I was unhappy with the small amount of sex and money I was getting. I was surly sometimes. I took pamphlets from pamphleteers, and leaflets from leafleteers, in public places when such activities were tolerated. Often those pamphlets and leaflets called for a more equal distribution of money throughout the social strata. I admit I sometimes thought that was a good

idea, although in truth the sex thing bothered me more. Now I, like everyone else who is concerned about our homeland, am happy. The glass really is half-full.

I am happy enough not to be a menace anymore. You could quote me on that, if you quote me to anybody. It is more likely you make written reports, isn't it? The word "menace" is spelled with a "c," in case you forgot that. But I am not one, whatever way you spell it. What I am doing is serving my country, I think. Your eyebrow went up! For you, that is nearly totally blowing your cool. But it is true. By being here, we are making other citizens feel safer. I am not actually making them safer by being confined, because I am not a menace. But they feel safer, knowing I am here, knowing that if eventually I do turn out to be dangerous, which would surprise me more than them, I have already been dealt with.

We are also serving, here in the boxes. That's what I've figured out.