

## Spring 1965

Great Bend High School sits at the corner of 19<sup>th</sup> and Morton, occupying a four-square block area on the *Mason-Dixon line* separating Roosevelt and Harrison Junior High School attendance zones. Somehow the students of the two junior highs would settle their differences at back-to-school night before their sophomore year, and enter the high school together as proud Black Panthers. The blonde brick campus of buildings was constructed in the mid-fifties, and had expanded twice by the time I was a junior in 1964. All this to accommodate the surge of baby-boomers and the addition to the curriculum of the practical arts (*school-speak* for kids who weren't going to college): auto shop, wood shop, home economics, and typing.

Across the street the City Park curled around the Brit Spaugh Zoo, home to a cacophony of monkeys, ducks, alligators, bison, bears, wolves, giraffes and lions. Spring breezes – what Grandma called “westerlies” -- brought the pungent odor of waste from the predators' cages. Mixed with the stench of the feed lot on the edge of town, these smells could be overwhelming if the breeze was right. The hydrangea bushes that lined the perimeter of the high school warded off the stink like an invisible shield.

On this late afternoon day in March, my mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Peyton Marlow (not her real name, I didn't want to embarrass her), the teen angel of the junior class. Pert, blonde, teeth like Sandra Dee's, Peyton froze every room she walked into with her uncommon beauty and a whiff of light cologne that trailed her like a royal cape. She sat beside me in chemistry and made it impossible to concentrate on the formulas, experiments, and lectures of Lester Spong. Lester Spong with the coke-bottle lenses in his wire rim glasses. Lester Spong with the starched white shirts and endless supply of ugly bow ties. Lester Spong with that ever present toothless grin that said, “I'm smarter than all of you put together, so don't try anything.”

That day I sat with head on hands training my eyes on Lester Spong's experiment but allowing my mind to race with fantasies of things to do with Peyton Marlow. Suddenly, a *phzzz* broke the bored silence of the lab. Heads dropped from crooked elbows, snapping the room to attention.

"What was that?" Terry Claassen, my lab partner, asked.

"I don't know, maybe it will happen again," I answered.

Terry had the brains of Einstein and the looks of Opie Taylor. Standing 6'0" and weighing 135 pounds, he looked like the Geico lizard with the voice of Darth Vader. The juxtaposition hollered for laughter every time he spoke.

*Phzzz*. It happened again. Lester Spong appeared to drop a tiny piece from a bar of soap into a beaker of water, producing the magical *phzzz*.

"Wow, that's crazy," Terry whispered. "What was that?"

Lester Spong cleared his throat, directing the attention from the magical beaker to his bulbous black, bespeckled pupils. He wanted us perplexed and unsatisfied more than he wanted us curious. But, as the bell rang, Terry and I were being tugged by curious.

"What would happen if you dropped a whole brick of that stuff in a tub of water?" Terry wondered.

"Wouldn't you like to find out?" I replied. And the tug of curious sparked the larger consideration of how we could make this happen.

We knew where Lester Spong kept the enchanted soap. We even knew its name – potassium. We knew when Lester Spong was not in his lab – fifth period when he met Aline Schmitt, the typing teacher, for coffee in the teachers' lounge. But, we did not know if the glass cabinet that housed the *phzzz*-making brick was locked. Our heist would take serious reconnaissance.

The next day during chemistry, Terry bumped Colleen Bryant into the glass cabinet. It was not an aggressive act, just enough to check if the knob of the cabinet's door was secure. It was not locked. Colleen smiled at Terry, not understanding that the bump was merely a ruse and not an invitation to anything more. Opie Taylor was only attracted to girls with freckles.

Later that afternoon, we struck when Lester Spong was chatting with Mrs. Schmitt. I stood guard at the entrance of his lab pretending to check my peechee for algebra notes while Terry slipped into Lester's room for an entire brick of the soap-like object.

Mission accomplished.

The end-of-school bell rang and Terry and I rushed out the south doors of the high school toward his house which adjoined the football practice field – a perfect coexistence of space and time for the final steps of our plot.

We searched his yard for a container big enough to hold a substantial volume of water. The geranium pot – too small. His sister's swimming pool, too large. The empty aquarium, too fragile. The large, forty-gallon trash barrel, just right. Our Goldilocks' machinations complete, we lugged the barrel across the street and into the middle of the practice field. We did not know what to expect when soap brick met water, but we certainly did not want to gamble on damaging any part of Terry's house. Mrs. Claassen would kill us.

We dragged the water hose across the street to the barrel and commenced to fill it up. Five gallons, ten, twenty, thirty. Why not all the way to forty? The water-filled barrel stood there waiting for our experiment to begin.

Standing near the curb at least fifty feet away, Terry and I took turns tossing the brick like horseshoes toward the barrel. Missed. We took three steps closer. Missed again. Three more steps. Still missed. The pressure of hitting the target merged with the stress of doing something evil and played havoc with our aim. Finally, in frustration, Terry, brick clutched in his thin

hand like Julius Erving with a basketball, loped up to the barrel and dunked it forcefully.

KABOOM!

The water gushed like Old Faithful a hundred feet into the air, buckling the trash barrel sides outwardly so that the barrel squished like a flattened soda can. I hit the ground stunned, then looked up and saw Terry weaving drunkenly toward me, sopped from head to toe. Terry staggered across the street, stumbled on the curb, narrowly missed decapitating himself on the clothesline, and retreated into the safety of his house.

I remained on the ground, the sole criminal in the Lester Spong heist. Who knew that the proclivities of potassium were so calamitous?

Seconds later, the practice field filled with students, teachers, administrators, and Lester Spong. I was ushered to the office like Public Enemy No. 1.

“Who helped you do this?” Mr. Halbower, the principal, asked.

I stood mute, refusing to divulge Terry’s name. I may be a bomber, but I was no snitch.

Mr. Halbower stood 6’6,” and was a retired Marine with the physical presence of Ares, the Greek god of war. He could turn miscreant students into quivering blubber with a single fixed stare. Mr. Halbower also attended the First Methodist Church with my family, and I knew full well that my parents would know about today’s incident before I got home. Own up to it, beg for mercy, allow a scourge of locusts to infest my body with sores. Anything to gain my freedom by May 8<sup>th</sup> and the Junior-Senior Prom.

*Go down, Moses. Let my people go.*

I argued that this was the only time I had appeared in the principal's office for anything unvirtuous during my two and one-half years at Great Bend High School. I was unlikely to do anything like this again. Five years of watching *Perry Mason* had given me the tools for cajoling a successful plea agreement from my parents: five weeks of being grounded on weekends, no telephone calling, and a written apology to Lester Spong. That would be the hardest part. I was not sorry.

I wondered how I would be received at school.

Before I got to chemistry class the next day, the potassium heist had taken on legendary proportion. Terry pledged allegiance to me for not having ratted him out, fellow juniors urged me to run for senior class president, and Peyton Marlow sent a note that smelled of Estee' Lauder hoping I would ask her to Prom. Who knew that the junior class answer to Brigit Bardot pined for someone like Pretty Boy Floyd?

Terry graduated the next year at the top of the GBHS Class of 1966 and matriculated to Dartmouth College on full scholarship before getting his law degree at Georgetown. We talked from time to time and reminisced at high school reunions – until our thirtieth year. Terry was killed in a plane crash with his son, Ben, in upstate New York when he was returning Ben to college from fall break.

I hadn't thought about the potassium explosion event for many years; in fact, not until the day I heard of Terry's death. And now it seemed like my only memory of Terry from high school. That, and how he signed my Rhorea Yearbook: "never forget our wonderful friendship."

I would discuss Terry's death with Mel several times over the next few months.

Together we reckoned that life's trivial moments sometimes bear significance in disproportion to their merit. They remind us that humanity

resides in minute details, unique experiences separating each of us from the other by poignant moments locked away in the brain's scrapbook waiting to be recalled at the oddest time. Sometimes our mischievous selves win out over the parental strictures of being a good boy. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

KABOOM.