

When Good Kids Do Bad Things

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Before I tell you about bad things I have done, let me first establish that I was a good kid.

I call to the witness stand Eureka City Schools. I have, somewhere in my possession, my report cards from first to sixth grade. Each of these report cards contains the commendation, in dot-matrix printer type, "Achieving at Apparent Ability". Think about it. What greater statement of character and integrity could one have? When was the last time we, as a nation, could say that of a sitting president? So, there you go. Skipping over comparisons to Lincoln or JFK, let's just say I was a good kid.

It seemed just a normal, day at Washington Elementary, home of the "Road Runners". The big kids, 4th-6th graders, were at recess, straining to see through the fog, smacking into playground equipment and each other as they wandered out their morning break. I rounded up my friends, all "apparent ability achiever" kids themselves, to see what was up. "Check this out" says one, reaching into his pocket to produce several tiny firecrackers. They were the kind we used to set off in our open hands without consequence. Not much louder than a cap gun, these "lady fingers" still had the fascination of being technically illegal at that time. There was an audible gasp from the group. Then silence, as we all thought about what that this might mean to us. Finally, in the vacuum of leadership, I said, "See, what we need to do, is tape these to rocks and throw them at that place", pointing at the National Guard armory on the other side of the south fence.

What did I just say? Was there even one shred of logic in that? I looked around my circle of friends. The expressions on their faces looked as if they were test-tasting outdated milk to see if had gone full-on sour yet.

"Yeah, we could do that" one finally said

Sometime between then and lunch break, a terrible idea became a terrible plan, and good kids were about to do bad things.

The National Guard Armory was situated sort of between Washington Elementary School and The Sequoia Park & Zoo, the zoo being on the other side of "W" street. It was well-positioned to defend the town against a violent riot spilling out of Washington School's southern border and a simultaneous massive security breach at the zoo, assuming that zoo animals (no doubt led by Bill the chimp) would attack from the west. But from a kids perspective, nothing ever happened at the armory.

So it came as little surprise to us when we tossed Five lightly-weighted ladyfinger firecrackers towards the chain link fence surrounding the armory, that nothing happened. Nobody heard the cap-gun-like report of firecrackers, nobody saw the brief flashes or the smoky wisps quickly consumed by the fog. It was a perfect crime, with only five witnesses. We went back and enjoyed the rest of our lunch break. The school day ended with no mention of the incident.

When judgement came looking for me the next day, it came in the person of Elva Waldheim, Principal and Acting Czar of Washington School. She was a physically powerful woman who all of us feared.

She burst into the afternoon class and said, "Excuse me, Mrs Sanderson," though it was clear from the tone of her voice that she was not deferring to Mrs. Sanderson or anyone else. This was her school and she was here to conduct business. "I need to see the following students in my office at once." And she read off 5 names. That was my entire crew, to the man. We followed her to her office. No one spoke.

I, myself had never done any hard time for Waldheim.. The only dirt at all that she had on me was a couple of playground fights and a single failed attempt to excuse myself from the lunch room early by stuffing my coleslaw into my crunched- down milk carton. I really had no idea what was in store for a serious offender.

Suddenly a spray of spittle hit the side of my face. Waldheim. Had she been screaming at me all of this time? Her mouth was moving and she appeared to be talking, but I couldn't make any sense of the words coming out. It was nothing like when a grown-up speaks in a television Charlie-Brown special, with all of the cute muted-trumpet noises. More like a red-hot roaring dialect spoken by dragons. Dragons that badly needed breath mints.

Slowly, I began to comprehend bits of Dragon -Speak, First just some words: "disappointed", "ashamed", "punishment", then finally, "You are all suspended from school for a period of two days time. Then you may bring back this signed paperwork and request reinstatement. And for now you will wait on the bench outside my office until the end of class." She handed us each a paper, hot-off the mimeograph machine. We wandered out of her office to the bench, looking, I imagine, like zombies. Down-trodden, sad, prisoner-of-war zombies, who had just lost the apocalyptic conflict.

Wow, "suspension". Serious stuff. Not one peep from that bench for a couple of minutes.

"So, like, what happens to us when we're suspended?"asked friend #4.

"They hang you by your underwear. From the flagpole – you're suspended". I quipped, getting absolutely no laughs at all for the effort and its timing.

"It's no big deal", says friend #3, apparently speaking from experience. "You just, you know stay at home..."

"And...", Friend #4 pressed.

"That's it. You don't go to school that day...or for us, two days. Do whatever you want. Show up two days later."

Some of the heads that were hanging down now looked up. And on some of them, I thought I

saw the beginnings of a smile.

The price of becoming a playground legend was apparently less today than I had thought.

I had some great teachers at Washington School.. As I have grown older, I have even learned to appreciate or at least understand the principal. We didn't make her job an easy one!