



ALL THAT GLOWS

by **Brandon R. Schrand**

I WAS HOOKED THE FIRST TIME my friends and I built a pipe-bomb and set it off under a rural night sky. I was sold on the art of their making. As a teenager, I obsessed over their alchemy; I gravitated toward the spell of their unleashing. Their quixotic allure. That sudden flower. I marveled at how they could shudder the earth and widen the sky. Their power, to me, was undeniable. To lord over something so destructive, was to see my work transform matter and rearrange physical space so that it was at once wholly foreign yet strangely familiar.

But that person, that boy, whose attention was singularly fixed on making those bombs, is alien to me now. I scarcely recognize him. When I look back and try to understand that boy, I find myself both alarmed and gratified by his audacity, both surprised and not surprised that he could take to something that destructive so naturally without a hint of reticence.

If you live through it, you will always remember your first bomb. I recall mine this way: It is March 1987 and four of us pile into the cab of Darren's '68 Chevy pickup. Darren, a wiry senior, in his usual uniform: cowboy boots, jeans, letterman's jacket. L.D., a quiet, if not smug offensive lineman, is also a senior. He sits shotgun leaving Shane and I – freshmen – in the middle. As teens, we generally have little to do but drag our main street in Soda Springs, Idaho. But this night is different. While Monsanto and other incendiary mines and chemical plants emit plumes of smoke and fire from furnace stacks, the town itself is asleep. It is cold and blustery. Road-gray banks of snow, pocked with cinder, hug parkstrips and lawns in their last moments of sublimation. The wind is ragged in the treetops. We sip cold beers and notice that ours is the only car out (save the occasional semi that blows through to Wyoming). I look over. The bomb rests in L.D.'s lap. The thick green fuse is coiled around the bomb's steely skin.

We head north of town, toward the silica quarry. We pass Monsanto, Kerr-McGee, Agrium and a handful of other mining operations scattered between grain fields. Out here farms abut mines. Years later I would spend a long time considering that kind of western collision. But tonight it is all tapestry. The black ribbon of highway cuts

through these fields and patches of snow.

Darren turns off the asphalt and onto a rutted lane. We feel the Chevy's rear wag through a mud hole. Dark puddles look like windows into the earth. As we jounce along the narrow road, which runs parallel to a barbed-wire fence, we hold our beers, carefully, above the dash so they don't slop over. The tape-deck is turned low and all we hear is the hum of the engine.

Ahead we notice a van parked perpendicular to the rutted road, backed up against the fence, its windshield facing out. The van, we notice, is running. Darren puts the truck in neutral as we lean forward and stare into the darkness.

"See that?" I say, pointing. Everyone nods. They can see it. It's a small orange light glowing inside the van. We stare but say nothing for several moments.

And then, after some debate as to whether or not we should

turn around, we decide to go on, that it will be fine. We will light the bomb.

At the silica quarry, mounds of machine-processed sand rise like pyramids. The surrounding hillside is exposed and stripped of vegetation, its insides spilling out onto the ground. Darren parks the Chevy behind one of the taller mounds near a bulldozer and a front-end loader, and switches the truck off. We sit for a minute and then get out. The night is cold and a shiver runs through me. The air smells good. It smells like diesel. It smells like work.

We trudge our way up a sand mound, one that is a good thirty feet high, and up on top the wind cuts through us. I look out and can see the faint line which is the road we followed. I trace it back and can see the van. I blink a few times and my eyes water from the chill. Then, I look south toward Monsanto. They have just dumped a molten pot of slag and the sky shoots orange. To an outsider it might appear as if a volcano has erupted, but to us, nothing could be more ordinary. The slag is a byproduct of the ore they mine, and about five times an hour they slop this magmatic refuse down a hill into a waste lagoon the color of graphite. It is comprised mostly of calcium and silica, but contains trace amounts of uranium and radium. When it is dumped, the sky glows orange, and it is as if night has become day again. Everything appears reversed like the landscape has been double-exposed. Up on top of that mound our skin turns orange and we look radiated.

L.D. is the one who places the bomb on the sand, pulls a lighter from his pocket and lights the fuse. Shane and I jump down the side of the mound and sand fills our shoes. Darren is right behind us, L.D. behind him. We run and duck behind a distant berm of sand. There we crouch, and wait. Blood pounds in my ears. We're ecstatic, laughing, happy.

And then – it blows.

It is spectacular. A pale blossom erupts and presses itself against the sky. I feel the earth give beneath me, and the report solid in my sternum. I'm smitten by the gravity of this thing we made, by the ringing song in my ears. Then after a round of high-fives, we drain our beers and take the rutted road back to the highway slowing to peek once more into the van's window. We drive on and talk about the bomb. For Shane and me, it was our first. L.D. and Darren, however, compare it with previous bombs.

I had seen a whole new world, or at least my familiar world reordered.

What we did not know that night, but would learn the next day at school was that there was a man in that van with the orange glow, and he had chosen to end his life along that rutted road. He ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the back window of his vehicle. (For a time we thought we killed him, that the bomb had stopped his heart.)

To this day I wonder if he was alive when we peered from our window into his. I wonder if he peered back? And if he did, was he hoping we'd stay or go? I wonder, too, if he heard our explosion or witnessed its fire, or felt the bomb's life in his poisoned chest. I wonder if he saw the sky turn orange. Perhaps, he was dead already, and his absence stared back from the window. We were innocent of that man and his wishes, and yet, we felt drawn to that quiet, anonymous spectacle. There was something about that glow that demanded we look.

The other bombs spill together in my memory in glimpses. A

bomb duct taped to a watermelon. One shut under the hood of a junked-out Corolla (remembered because the hood blew into the sky). The bomb we covered with a fifty-five gallon barrel (remembered because we never found the barrel). And so on. But among these, there is a second bomb that vividly stands out in my memory. It was not remarkable for its design, or for what it transformed, or rearranged. In fact, it was an ugly bomb, a junk bomb made with scrap material. The one-inch diameter pipe was a three-way, T-shaped, plumbing joint with threads on each end, onto which I screwed three galvanized caps. Small enough to palm, it could have competed with three M-80s strapped together. But it was a bomb, and even a small, ugly bomb was better than no bomb on a feckless Saturday afternoon in Soda Springs, Idaho.

Two friends gladly tagged along that day. Scott, the sheriff's son, wore spiky Billy Idol hair, an Iron Maiden T-shirt, and a green trench coat. Jeremy wore acid washed jeans and a Mötley Crüe T-shirt. He was nearly blind but refused to wear glasses, and his mom couldn't or wouldn't pay for contacts. So he constantly squinted and was known as a personal-space invader, always talking too close. But Scott and Jeremy were witty guys, always good for a joke, and I was glad to have their company.

We crammed into my small pickup – a 1979 Ford Courier I spray-painted black and fluorescent green – and drove east toward Wyoming. I turned off the highway and we wound down into the gravel pits, a system of windblown, achromatic lesions near the shooting range and airport. The airport was little more than a strip of asphalt skirted by June-grass and a sagging chain-link fence. We set the bomb down atop a hummock of gravel, placed a boulder on top, lit the fuse, and scrambled for cover. When the bomb blew, one of its caps shot like a missile, ricocheted off a slab stone, and missed Scott's face by two feet.

We all heard its whine, but Scott claims to have seen the projectile. *It was coming right at me!*

It was too close. I remember all of us laughing though – hysterical, cathartic laughter that said, unbelievably, we were alive.

I remember that bomb for the wail of the ricochet, and Scott's widening eyes. I can still feel the tremble in my hands. But most of all, I remember it because like many close-calls, the memory is haunted by a stream of what-ifs. What if Scott had stood two feet to the left? What if the yaw of the missile had shifted two or three degrees? What if it had gone my way or Jeremy's? Each scenario is its own ricochet rebounding from one surface of unimaginable possibilities to another, a succession of horrors. And yet, despite these invasive thoughts, or more precisely because of my fortune, I kept making bombs.

By my senior year in high school, our pipe-bomb stories had woven themselves into the fabric of teen lore in our small town. I suppose we recognized this fact to some degree and decided to act on it. And because we were widely known for our pranks – having hoisted a cast-iron bathtub onto the roof of the high school, and having strung a dummy up the flagpole, or abandoning a broken toilet in the center of main street flanked by blinking "Water Department" signs, for instance – it seemed inevitable that we would marry our love of bomb-building with the sphere of the public school. Some things seem fated to lead to others.

Let me be clear, our intention was not harm, destruction, or doom, but entertainment. That the high school's population of some

300 students knew our stories made them the kind of captive audience who understood the plot, without knowing the surprise ending.

While Scott and Jeremy did not participate in this mission (Scott had graduated a year earlier and left for boot camp, and Jeremy dropped out), I was accompanied by John with pegged pants and Flock of Seagulls hair; Garrett, a bony, ironic, skateboarding son of a banker; and Travis, a tow-headed lanky smart aleck. The plan was simple. Hurl a lit, but *empty* pipe-bomb down the hallway during lunch hour. It was brilliant – hurl the dud, and yell “*Bomb!*” We’d watch everyone scatter like roaches under the glow of floodlamps.

Our stomachs were a mess of nerves all morning long. Between classes we exchanged smirks and muted laughter. Girls with large nests of hair would snap their gum and ask, “What is with you guys?”

“Oh, you’ll see,” we’d say. “You’ll see.”

In Government class, I kept rubbing my sweaty palms on my jeans while Mr. Morgan, a stocky man who coached football, yammered on about how conservative means “to conserve” money, resources, etc., and how liberal means “to waste” them. I kept one eye on the clock certain the bell for lunch would never ring.

When it did ring, John, Garrett, Travis and I met at my locker. “Let’s wait until right before the bell,” I said. The idea, of course, was to cause enough of a stir that we could get out of the next class.

“Right. Like two minutes before,” Garrett said, his body wrenching with excitement.

At two minutes before the bell, the hall was utterly clogged with milling students, fumed with hairspray and humming with the din of chatter. I pulled the hollow pipe from my backpack. John lit the fuse. Then I slid it down the hall, and as it spun, sparks flickered in a series of mesmerizing curlicues.

“*BOMB!*”

“*A fucking BOMB!*”

Heads turned and smiles wilted as everyone started to run and scream – screamed for their lives. People nearly trampled one another trying to get down the flight of stairs to safety. And while those images – the faces, the people, the shock in their eyes – are somewhat muddled in my memory, one image resonates with haunting clarity. It is one I will not forget.

Our biology teacher, Mr. Carter, stood at his locked classroom door with a Styrofoam coffee cup in one hand and a jangling set of keys in the other. The fuse hissed just a few feet away as he tried frantically, desperately and hopelessly to unlock his door, to reach for his own safety. And when it became clear to him that he would never open that door and he might in fact die trying, he shrieked, “*Shit!*” dropped his coffee and keys and bolted for the stairwell. All that remained in the hallway was a pool of spilled coffee, the cup and its white lid, the empty bomb, and four smart-mouthed recusants who thought they had done something funny.

NOW, AS A PARENT AND TEACHER, I struggle to reconcile my current self with the young man who built bombs, who dreamed of that kind of violence, or the gesture of violence, even in jest. As a parent, nothing could be worse than seeing my child’s school on national television swarmed with police. As a teacher it is my quiet nightmare. What is most shocking to me is that my preoccupation with bombs was a matter of violence for the sake of violence.

TWO YEARS AGO I WAS INTRODUCED to Malcolm Gladwell’s book,

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference. What I find most interesting about Gladwell’s work is his treatment of The Broken Window Theory as it relates to crime in New York City. This theory holds that if a window in a warehouse, say, is broken and goes unrepaired, it sends a message that no one cares about that neighborhood (and by extension the people who inhabit it), and as a result, another window will be broken, and another, and so on. Soon, graffiti will appear, and after that, other crimes will crop up. While the Broken Window Theory has seen some criticism, it does posit that which most of us already believe: the environment affects our behavior.

I drew connections almost instantly. If the theory can be applied to an urban landscape, could it also be applied to a rural one? And if so, what might it suggest about kids building bombs in rural Idaho (or domestic violence, accidents, addictions, or men committing suicide in vans, for that matter)? If you live in a dismantled, rearranged and strip-mined landscape, as I had, for instance, what sort of cues and messages does the very place you inhabit send? What lessons does that world impart? What can you take away? We cannot be wholly surprised by the extent of imitative behavior.

Years before I detonated any pipe bombs, I learned the term strip mine. One summer day when I was ten or eleven, I jumped in my Uncle Dallas’ Toyota truck and we drove north of Soda Springs on Highway 34 to join the rest of our family for a picnic and fishing on the shores of the Blackfoot Reservoir. I don’t recall anything whatsoever about the picnic itself, but I do remember with clearness the eighteen-mile drive there. It was a typical drive in almost every way. Dallas always drove the speed limit. The weather was pleasant. And the back of the truck contained a cooler filled with ice and soft drinks. I sat shotgun, delighted I was riding with my uncle, and nervous, too, that I might say something foolish and embarrass myself. As a result, I said very little.

I remember passing Monsanto at the very edge of town and I gazed at all the other processing plants in its radius. I saw the ripening barley fields sown between the mines and the yellow mountains flickering with stands of aspens whose trunks shone bone white against the brush. These sights, though, were all too familiar. Soda Springs is a mining town first, and an agricultural town second. Tailings piles and crop fields were so omnipresent they had somehow become absent in my field of vision. I could look right at Monsanto and not even see it.

“Look at that,” Dallas said, pointing out the truck window toward Dry Valley. Large road graders and Electro-Haul dump trucks crawled across a mountainside like insects. “You know what that’s called?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Strip mining.”

I TRIED THE TERM OUT quietly in my own mouth: *strip mining.*

Dallas stared straight ahead. “When you’re my age, that mountain will be gone.”

I looked at him, baffled. “What do you mean, gone? Like *gone*, gone?”

“Yeah. *Gone.*”

I studied the mountain. Its top had already been removed as if it were some kind of lid. I tried to imagine the mountain gone. Then I tried to imagine what it looked like before its top had been cleared away. The strange thing was that it seemed easier to imagine it gone, rather than imagining it there, as a whole mountain. Its absence

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“YEAH. GONE.”

seemed more natural than its presence. For the rest of the drive Dallas stirred up a maelstrom of indictments against the mining industry and its destruction of the land. I was astonished. Never before had I heard anyone talk like that. What he spoke of stood in stark contrast to what I generally heard around town, how one was damn lucky to get a job at Monsanto, and how if it weren't for that plant, there wouldn't be a Soda Springs. No one ever spoke against the mines. It was its own brand of blasphemy. What my uncle told me that day was foreign, but exhilarating for its unexpectedness and its searing edge.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN my past and present came full circle last summer while I was visiting Soda Springs. One morning I packed a sandwich and some water and drove north, again on Highway 34, for some bird watching. I noticed a number of things as I started out. Monsanto's operations had expanded to the other side of the highway. The mountain my uncle had pointed out all those years ago wasn't gone, but it was noticeably, eerily, smaller. The tailings piles were significantly larger and more expansive. And the barley fields were shrinking as the phosphate ore mines continued to sprawl. I noted, too, that on the east side of the road, what used to be miles of farm-ground had been razed to a barren penneplain of sun-baked dirt. I returned my gaze to the road in time to see what I took to be a road construction crew stopping traffic. When I couldn't see any construction equipment or discernable road work, I began to wonder why we were stopped. And then I felt it – that old familiar thud deep in my chest, the thick, heavy report of a bomb's detonation. From the center of the razed land erupted a dark mushroom cloud of earth and dust. When the air cleared, I noticed two white company pickups, each crowned with a yellow, glowing light, approach the fumarole. We had been stopped, not by an IDOT crew, but by a mining company. After five or so minutes, they waved us by.

It was not strange or troubling that I had witnessed such a blast. The strange and troubling part was my reaction. Caught unaware, I felt a surge of delight resurface after years of dormancy. The mushroom cloud, about a half-mile in diameter, was a spectacular sight by any definition. And I swear I almost said, *Cool* even though there was nothing cool about it. But for that very instant it was as if the wiring of my former self had somehow crossed with the wiring of my current self, and I felt the world give way for a moment.

A few days after the mine blast, I took another drive north, this time at night. I turned off Highway 34 and turned past Monsanto, stopping at Hooper Springs, a small park about two hundred yards from the Monsanto grounds and the gray slag lagoon. I got out, stretched and took a brisk walk. The night was cool and damp and the starlit skies were sheet-metal clear. On my way back to the car, I

stepped inside a gazebo and crouched by the large bubbling spring for which the park is named. I sunk my hand into the roiling pool and cupped the cold water to my mouth. When I stood, I saw the sky lighten at my back. A Monsanto pot carrier had just spilled another cauldron of slag over into the dumping station. I turned to face it and quailed, almost, at how the landscape had transformed. I had nearly forgotten the extent and reach of that radiant glow. As I wiped my mouth and flicked the mineral water off my hand, I was reminded of the night I lit my first pipe bomb just a mile up the road.

I began to think again about the young man I was then, the one who lived in a place that in many ways typifies the western American contradiction: the beautiful and the destroyed. On the one hand the West is home to Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon. And on the other, Los Alamos, Yucca Mountain, Hanford. It is a paradise. It is a wasteland. It is both garden and proving ground. Manifest Destiny swept my family and so many others west promising them a new Eden, insuring them, in fact, they could take what they wanted, that land was a commodity and that it was expendable. To pretend that the mythologies of the nineteenth century are bygone notions, that they no longer govern our behavior, our decisions and indeed our policies is as dangerous as playing with black powder. But that is part of the contradiction, living out the mythology against the reality.

Recently, an AP article cited Soda Springs and, by extension, Caribou County, as the 13th most polluted in the United States in terms of air quality. Within hours, Monsanto released what they called a “fact sheet” categorically dismissing the article's claim, assuring the citizens of Soda Springs that Eden was still Eden, that nothing had changed. Rest assured.

We exist in a broken landscape but insist that it is pristine. Perhaps an over-mined, bombed-out and gutted landscape cannot influence behavior. Maybe I am overstating the case. Or maybe not. After all, does it seem entirely unreasonable that generations of industrial extraction or clear cutting or waste storage could negatively affect a local communities' perception of their landscape? I don't know. As a teenager I never consciously thought, *No one else seems to give a shit about this place, why should I?* But the idea was there, I think. Just beneath the surface.

We could do worse than to consider the relationship between a rearranged landscape and our own desperate behaviors. Sometimes I'm afraid we fail to draw the connections. It is alarming when silos and slag pours seem natural to us, when they have become the scenery. Or when we have forgotten that the land looked any other way. We see the damage, but not the repercussions. But seeing is hard work, and I am only beginning. I am hopeful that from now on when I see the glow, or some strange light that feels out of place, that I won't look away. <HDJ>