

Salt peter

Maybe one of the dumbest things I ever did as a kid was try to blow up Mrs. Malozzi's garden. But that was back in the 1950's when a youngster wouldn't have been jailed for making one tiny old bomb. "Boys will be boys," would have kept me from the slammer. Today I would be hauled through the criminal justice system and I'd need someone like the late Johnny Cochrane shouting to the jury, "If the bomb ain't fizin', don't send Dave to prison."

Bombs are pretty easy to make. I figured all I needed was gunpowder, but since no gun store clerk in his right mind would sell the stuff to a thirteen-year-old kid, I had to mix my own.

Always the student, I opened the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to find a formula using potassium nitrate and other easily found ingredients. The encyclopedia's editors helpfully mentioned that potassium nitrate was nothing more than the common chemical salt peter, a container of which I remembered seeing just a week before, high on a shelf behind the counter at Lambert Luzeri's Drug store down on the corner.

Not knowing salt peter was rumored to have been put in the food of enlisted men during the war to lessen their carnal appetites ... to sort of shrink any possibilities and keep a lid on it ... I brazenly belied up to the counter and asked Mr. Luzeri if I could buy the box, and more if he had it.

"What do you want with the salt peter?" Mr. Luzeri asked me, a thirteen-year-old nascent terrorist.

"Uh, you know," I stammered, "what you usually want the stuff for." I hadn't the slightest idea what I meant. I just knew how to backhand a question.

"Does your father know you're going to bring home all of this salt peter?"

"Sure thing," I lied. "It's for him!"

The bomb didn't work as I hoped it would. I mixed all the ingredients, poured the stuff in a foot-long mailing tube and glued an M-80 firecracker inside as a detonator. Me and my friend George carried it behind the garage to Mrs. Malozzi's garden, lit the fuse and ran back behind the corner of the garage. If the bomb had successfully exploded as intended, with approximately two pounds of gunpowder ripping open the afternoon sky, scurrying behind the corner of the building would have been about as useful as raising an umbrella in a nuclear attack. Half of Cornhill would have felt the shock wave.

The M-80 exploded with a deafening bang, but the ingredients didn't ignite, luckily. Instead, salt peter showered over the garden. Turns out salt peter is also a great fertilizer. Mrs. Malozzi still talks about how great the tomatoes were that year.

A few days after what George and I would forever refer to as the "Great Fertilization," Dad was driving me to school when Peggy Lee's "Fever" (when you touch me!) came on the car radio. Dad reached over and turned it off. Just to annoy him, I said, "Nice song." "No, it isn't," he replied.

There was dead silence for a moment and I always knew what that meant. We were going to have a talk.

“Mr. Luzeri called me,” he said. “Seems you bought a lot of saltpeter.”

I still knew nothing of the chemical’s withering effect on males.

“And you told him it was for me,” he continued.

Surely, Mr. Luzeri didn’t think my father was making bombs!

“But we figured you bought it for yourself,” said my father. “And you know, saltpeter can be dangerous.”

Could Dad have heard about the explosion in the tomato patch?

“So, David, I just wanted to say that some things in a boy’s life are very natural and you shouldn’t worry so much about it or use chemicals to ... well, to dry it up.”

“You mean blow it up, Dad?”

“Well, yes, that too.”

“It was just an experiment, Dad.”

“I’m sure,” he replied.

“I just wanted to see if it worked.”

“Uh huh.”

“And if it did, I was going to write it up for the school newspaper.”

My father slowed the car and brought it to the curb. He set the brake and turned to look at me.

“You certainly don’t think they would print it, do you?”

“No, probably not. But they’re always looking for personal experiences.”

“David,” he said, “no school newspaper is going to print a story about a kid who eats a box of saltpeter to keep from having an erection!”

My father just said what? How did he know that word? Could he even speak it as a member of the Knights of Columbus? Mr. Luzeri had indeed looked at me very strangely that day. But who in their right mind would want to ... to dry it up, anyway?

“Well, uh ...” was about all I could say.

“David, tell me you are not going to write it up for the school paper.”

“Of course not,” I said.

The rest of the ride was silent. I felt like a pervert in my father’s eyes, even though I knew that was silly. But admitting to tomato bombing wasn’t a pleasant thought, either.

Finally, as we pulled up in front of the school, I said, “I really didn’t eat a box of saltpeter, you know.”

“I can tell,” he said, “You’re still breathing.”

“And it wasn’t the kind of experiment you’re thinking of. I just can’t tell you about it.”

“Or you’d have to kill me?”

“Somebody might get killed, yes.”

He sighed, “You’ll be late for school. Why don’t you go and sin no more.”

“Yup, good idea,” I said. “See you tonight.”

That evening, I quietly marked the pages on gunpowder in the encyclopedia. I drew a bold circle around the ingredients list and underlined the word, “saltpeter” twice. I was never sure Dad came across it as I had intended, but years later as my wife and I were leaving for our honeymoon, he hugged me goodbye and said, “Don’t eat any firecrackers.”

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