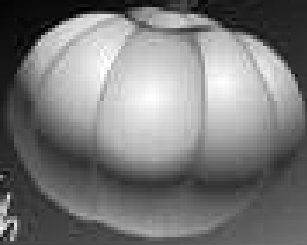


# I THOUGHT I HAD A PUMPKIN BOMB

By John Hertz

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Some of the adventures of my misspent youth actually happened.

In fifth grade, I really did tape a plastic rocketship to an essay I turned in. It stood on its tail, as God and Mr. Heinlein meant it to. I had read all the Heinlein juveniles in the library, having begun SF with Raymond F. Jones' *Son of the Stars*, unless you count learning to read during nursery school by making my mother read *Through the Looking Glass* aloud until I could too. I really did host birthday parties where we all went to a commercial bakery to watch bread made or a dairy to watch milk bottled. In a third grade paper on beavers I really insisted on writing "teeeth," many times, not only in this so irritating poor Miss Leidberg, since deceased, whom I couldn't bear either, that I was transferred to Miss Drucker's fourth grade where I could happily review *Exodus* and *The Man Who Never Was*. Miss Drucker said a book report only proved what you read, a book review gave what you thought. In sixth grade, I really did try to lead a class campaign against friction. "Down with Friction," I wrote everywhere. We could stop with magnetic brakes. But I never made one box of Herzls, the pretzel-flavored breakfast cereal (Herzls are yummy), name carefully adjusted when I found that Theodor Herzl my pretended eponym didn't use a T.

In high school I really tried out for Jean in *Rhinoceros* having practiced turning into a rhinoceros for weeks, was rejected grief-stricken, accidentally read Berenger so girls could try for Daisy, and was cast on the spot; the schedule was doubled since there already was a Berenger; then the play was canceled when he fell sick; all after I no longer attended that school. When a friend published "Gaek! gaek! the snake" in *Concept*, the literary magazine, a gang of us built the Glorious Analog Electronic Komputer for the school fair; I was inside with carts of reference books; our sign said "Secrets of the Universe, 10¢ each"; after many hours someone sent in "What are the secrets of the universe?" and I answered "10¢ each." Later we all admitted it ought to be pronounced *geek*. But the pumpkin bomb we—I'll come to that.

I picked up magic as a hobby, literally and Bruce Elliott's book. We had ten-minute passing periods. I began to look like a pear, because I kept in my trousers pockets a pack of cards, rope, scissors, a few thimbles, balls of colored sponge, and things too fierce to mention. I was on a television show, and despite everything was paid in Holloway candies. Somehow I still like Milk Duds. I taught magic at summer camp, leaving an earlier one in a blaze of glory after leading my

cabin to prizes with a sabot float, I mean really a float, the sheets washed loose in the lake, and with rewritten Flanders & Swann songs everyone laughed at but no one recognized. The toilet paper gag didn't work. We knew our counselor came in late from his night out. We thought he drank. We decided to fill his bed with toilet paper. Befuddledly he would be lost to determine what it was. No lights. His toes would find it. What in the world? He would reach down and catch a piece. Pull at it. Shred. Another piece. Another. Shred, shred. Sitting in mystery on the edge of his bunk. Still at it by dawn. Shred, shred. Diabolical. At sunrise we saw him dead asleep, full length, in the bed we had for *lagniappe* removed to the floor. He never noticed that or the carefully measured toilet paper we had spent hours stuffing into his bedclothes. We never did learn how he reached his bed and not its springs which remained in the usual place. Shred.

At the next camp I was Charlie Davenport in *Annie Get Your Gun*, although I couldn't sing. I made friends with the owner's son and went stealing cherries from trees across the fence. I put on scuba gear for the fantastically clear water of a clay-bottom lake. Different lake. I fell in love with a girl counselor and read Thurber to her in secluded spots. That adventure seemed never to happen, but we stayed in touch for years and when she married I met her husband. What did I know?

I'm coming to the pumpkin bomb.

Back in school a friend one day said "I see you all over." I said "There's twelve of me." I cached extra shirts, briefcases, shoes, changing in each of those ten-minute periods. When he asked "Weren't you wearing a different watch?" I said "That was No. 8." I was late for geometry but I kept it up for days. The most interesting thing in geometry was simple closed curves. We drew them in complicated intricacies like Shambleau. We were contrary children. We learned the Shaw Alphabet, which I've forgotten, and passed notes in Morse Code until we realized how stupidly we'd trained ourselves to read ink dots and dashes instead of hearing *dah dididit dit dah ditdidit dididah dah dididit*. I've forgotten that too, relearned for a Third Class license and forgot again. We played four-dimensional tic-tac-toe on blackboards until we grew infatuated with a game someone said was Goban, invented by bored Japanese on the sand. You draw squares 8 x 8 and put a mark in one. Opponent marks one. Winner is the first to get five in a row, column, or diagonal; if either plays in an edge square you add one row on each of the four sides. The bookstore had a run on graph paper. In the snack bar we sat round the tables playing Concentration, snapping fingers and calling numbers. We tried hand signs to see if we could manage in silence but kept losing the rhythm. At fourteen I was on the varsity debate team and went out for hamburgers in -20° fondly Fahrenheit. My debate partner, another older girl, introduced me to *Marjorie Morningstar* and musicals. We read, and once actually saw, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad*. I sawed the Senior Class president in half. That almost didn't happen and she may have a scar.

At home there was a German Shepherd and later a Dachshund. I tried to teach the Dachshund to jump through a hoop. I wanted her to jump through the middle, the proper way. She walked under the rim. Cleverly I rested it on the

ground. She walked over it. Resorting to dog biscuits I coaxed her to jump over the rim of the hoop, gradually raising it into the air. After weeks, or decades, although she still just cleared the rim I finally had her jumping two or three feet high. To get her through the middle I rested the rim on the ground. She walked over it. So much for my passing the Mensa exam.

The next school was short between periods, but I somehow did enough magic to meet Bob Passovoy. As a Chemistry lab aide I helped discover a new element. It had to be an element because it didn't react with anything. It was found at the bottoms of test tubes. In "anything" I include sulfuric acid and *aqua regia*, which we mixed on scant excuse. We decided to name our discovery Crud. But this raised a problem. C was taken, Cr was taken, Cu was taken, Cd was taken. None of us knew Latin or German for "crud." Another adventure that didn't happen. Miss Laird was the kind of woman who liked to tell how in Germany with two friends, when she told a Berlin waiter "Dry Martini," and the other two each said "Dry Martini," the waiter brought nine Martinis. Mr. Purvenas the physics teacher I was harder on; bored, which he couldn't help. I passed notes with a girl who liked e.e. cummings and Marvel Comics. Whenever he nabbed me to come to the board and do a problem I did. I earned a top grade fair and square. The girl moved to Canada. In those days I tutored trigonometry, forgotten, and haunted a university computer lab one neighborhood to the north. I wrote machine language for an IBM 1620, which did arithmetic by looking up tables. I never learned them myself. Alan Frisbie later explained the 1620 was almost named CADET, until some bright fellow squeaked "I know what that stands for: Can't Add, Doesn't Even Try." I met a computer so old it filled rooms, and ran magnetic tape inches wide, with sprocket holes down the middle, in vertical drives that piled tape at the bottoms of wells. Following an article by Victor Yngve, I wrote a program to generate grammatically correct, if nonsensical, English sentences. It was on punched cards, eventually 1,600 of them. In a science fair it took me two levels until a judge said it lacked drama. I never could make it work.

School was more than 99% black. I was Senior Class vice president. I ran on "Who cares who's for president, who's for vice?" No one recognized that either. I had read all the *Pogo* and *Oz* of the Baptist minister father of the girl next door. They had a mulberry tree. I liked the way it couldn't make up its mind how many lobes to grow on the leaves, but we were sad it wasn't a bush. I impressed my rabbi and won a prize with a pastiche in which he recognized Carl Sandburg but not the *Mad* parody. My high school class almost refused graduation. Mr. Pollock the Band teacher said he was tired of "Pomp and Circumstance." It was trite and shallow and he wouldn't. He wanted the Grand March from *Aida*. We actually struck over this, with signs, in the street. I was helpless. Earlier I had marched with Martin Luther King. I knew what marching was but at politics I wasn't good enough. I had forgotten "Pomp and Circumstance" was Houdini's theme. That might not have done any good. In compromise we had no procession; when parents arrived they found us seated; the band played "More," which it had not rehearsed, while 600 of us walked one by one across the stage. I won a National Merit Scholarship and couldn't get into Oberlin.

At Antioch where everything seemed to be magic I fell out of practice. In my

first year I took English IV and learned Gerard Manly Hopkins. A teaching aide said “If you can explain *With up so floating many bells down* I’ll read e.e. cummings.” I fell in love with China and a woman who kept a rabbit and loved Japan. Mr. Wong introduced me to Confucius and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and Mencius and Hsün Tzu and Han Fei Tzu and the great translator Arthur Waley. He laid out a Chinese poem, four lines of five characters each, and seven or eight English versions like the Five Blind Men and the Elephant. Folk dancing drew 300 people every week, including me. I met Alexander Kerensky and Paul Krassner and Timothy Leary and Babatunde Olatunji and Doc Watson. Alan Watts never returned my tape recorder. I scheduled hours of classical music for the radio station and broadcast an experimental program “Studies in Greenred” that took a week making each half hour. I put on a mixed-media evening *Psychlone* with slide-projector controls in the audience; as these hip people sat waiting I asked, by a microphone backstage, “Is this entertainment? Is this *entertainment*? Is *this* entertainment?” I masterminded the Great Barbara & John Lamb Memorial Easter Egg Hunt—they were alive—for which we bought every egg in Yellow Springs (the name is very strange to a Chinese), boiled them, colored them, and hid them. Most were found next day, ahem.

I want to talk about the pumpkin bomb.

In high school we played croquet and read science fiction. I was much taken with Sturgeon’s “Skills of Xanadu” and Bester’s “Pi Man,” and Long’s “To Follow Knowledge,” the curtain piece of the Conklin anthology *Science Fiction Adventures in Dimension*. We heard you could make a pumpkin bomb. It was simple. You cut open a pumpkin and scoop out the insides. Discard about a third. Mix the rest with sugar. Refill the pumpkin. Seal the top with paraffin. Let it stand. In a few days, or a week, it will explode.

We liked this. What to do with it? Talking it over, we realized that the right person for it was Steve Allen. He had made the *Tonight* show, and goo-goo dolls. His “Question Man,” when given an answer, like “Strontium 90, Carbon 14,” provided the question, like “What was the score of the Strontium-Carbon basketball game?” If Ernie Kovacs was the Purcell of television, Steve Allen was the Saint-Saëns; he did everything, now and then wonderfully; and over all shone a mild wackiness, his own invention. We could see sending him a pumpkin bomb, and his keeping it on the piano. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have our pumpkin bomb here. It might explode tonight. Maybe it won’t.” If it blew up while the camera wasn’t on it, he could make an event of the cleaning.

*Tonight* had not been in Steve Allen’s hands for years.

We made a trial pumpkin bomb. For a first attempt we got a pumpkin no bigger than a breadbox. Autumn. We opened a lid in the top, leaving a rabbit as you would to make a jack o’lantern. Walt Disney’s *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is correct: originally “jack o’lantern” meant a man (“jack”) carrying a lantern, then a will-o’-the-wisp, then a pumpkin hollowed for a light and carved with a face. We mixed the sugar, returned the filling, and sealed. There was a perfect ledge outside the basement. We waited.

—John Hertz