

HUMAN BOMB!

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as told to Nick Ellena

stimulate that single frantic spasm toward mass murder?

I walked out with questions rushing through my mind. Runyon followed, his cupped hands shielding the dynamite from sight. He made me get into the car first. Then it hit me—I had to get that mike open! If not, the boys at the station couldn't help. And another question arose: Could the electrical impulse from the transmitter set off the dynamite?

I chanced it, sweeping the mike off the hook as I sat down and shoving it under my thigh. Then I took a deep breath and turned it on. Nothing happened.

"Let's get going," Runyon said. I took a moment to catch my breath. "Head for Mandy's," he insisted.

"Let's just ride around, huh, Don?"

His eyes searched me suspiciously. "Mandy's," he said. "I'm not falling for any of your traps."

All I could do was repeat our destination, hoping the station would hear and get officers there ahead of us. Mandy's was only three minutes away, so I decided to stall to give police more time. I signaled a left turn, and immediately Runyon tensed.

"That's not the way to Mandy's!" There was a hysterical edge in his voice. "Head straight—I warned you, *no tricks!*"

When we rolled into Mandy's parking lot, I was both frightened and disgusted. I hadn't been able to stall Runyon or get him into an isolated area. All I'd succeeded in doing was moving him from a busy bar to a more crowded restaurant in the heart of the shopping district. Runyon was in complete control and knew it. He made me sit at a table facing the wall while he commanded a view of the door. When police came in, he would spot them immediately.

"Why do you want to die, Don?" I asked. I was stalling now just to give myself time to think how I could gain mastery of the situation. Precious time had been lost; there might not be much more of it left. "Life can't be that bad," I added.

"I'm not afraid of death, Carl," he replied, calm again. "And I don't care how many I take with me—except my kids. I wouldn't have killed them. I just said that to scare my wife."

He was talking! That was a minor triumph, I thought. It kept his mind off those two wires. He was telling me about his marital problems and the drinking and gambling that caused them. Suddenly he stopped talking. His head jerked angrily.

"What are you pulling, Carl?" he snarled.

The Captain Thinks Fast

I could feel my heart speed up. What had I said wrong?

"Why is Captain Phippen here?" he asked.

I looked around and saw the captain approaching the restaurant manager, Ken Gilbert. When I turned to Runyon, his fingers were tightening their grip on the batteries. *Oh, Lord*, I thought, *it's come*. Words came out of me without me fully realizing it:

"Wait, Don, wait. Let's ask Phippen why he's here. Don't jump off!" Rage, fear, and perplexity were all mixed in Runyon's expression. I took advantage of his confusion to call to the captain: "What are you doing here?"

"We're having a peace-officers' meeting," Phippen replied without hesitation. "I'm making arrangements for the dinner." Then he and the manager went to the cash register and began talking casually—so casually that Don soon lost interest in them and resumed his story.

Actually, of course, Captain Phippen was asking Gilbert to approach the customers and tell them to leave the premises as naturally as possible. It was several minutes before Runyon

stopped talking again and said, "That's funny. All the people have left the place."

"I guess they had enough to eat." Even as I said it, I realized how insane the statement was. Runyon whirled around, once again driven to the edge of desperation. Just then a waitress saved the day. Phyllis Woodruff, who had once worked with Runyon's wife, had volunteered to stay behind to make things seem more natural. At just the right moment she came to us with a refill of coffee, talking pleasantly to us just as if her life wasn't right on the line with ours.

By the time she left, Runyon was almost calm again, I asked him whether I could help him, and he replied only one thing could help him—a talk with his wife about reconciliation. I agreed to set up a meeting at my home the following morning and just as I thought I had talked him out of suicide-murder, he came up with the shocker.

"Good. When you arrange the meeting with my wife—then you'll get the dynamite."

Only One Approach Left

I was stunned. I'd tried stalling, tricks, and cajoling, all without success. One thing was left: getting tough and forgetting the possible consequences.

The hardness in my voice startled even me. "Don, you're not leaving here with that dynamite. Set it off if you want or give it to me. But you don't walk out on the street with it."

He went rigid in his chair. My shirt was sticking to the flesh on my back. "How will you stop me, Carl? Will you shoot me?" he asked.

"No, but I'm not letting you walk away with that dynamite. Do you want to see your wife? Okay, I'll take care of it. Or do you want to blast us both off? Okay, it's up to you."

We haggled. Would I promise he would see his wife? *Yes*. Would he go to jail? *No*. We went back and forth.

Slowly he reached deep into his pocket and drew out the dynamite. I couldn't see anything but those two sticks coming toward me. Then, at the last minute, he drew them away. This was too much. I decided to go for him—I'd had all I could take. Then, almost casually, he spoke again: "Let me disarm this. You'll kill us both."

"Give it to me!" My patience had run out, and that was bad. I checked myself. *Let him have his way just a little longer*, I told myself. He was an expert with dynamite, but I wondered how steady he was now, particularly handling such a delicate type of explosive. My eyes fixed on his finger; it probed inside one stick and twisted. My breath caught. He pulled out the detonator cap and handed me the dynamite.

"Everything, Don," I insisted. "The cap, too." He handed over the cap, wires, and batteries. There was a rush of noise and motion as other officers moved in on us and secured him. I hardly noticed, just staring at the dynamite equipment.

"Where are they taking me, Carl?" Runyon asked. Now he was just a poor, frightened creature.

"To get you some help," I answered. "Don't worry. I said we'll help you. We will."

I hoped I was right and that Don Runyon could be helped. I certainly didn't intend to deceive him—just save his life and mine. And, I've wondered since, how many other lives as well.

(Editors' Note: The name of the "human bomb" has been changed in this true story. The real "Don Runyon" subsequently was committed to a state mental institution for psychiatric care.)