



A Miss is as Good as a Mile

It's 'Birthday Sunday' again here on Story A Week, and because it has been quite a few years since I began following a tradition of writing about family members on their birthdays, we're now running into repeats. Today's 'target person' has been a topic before ... and has he ever! Yes, it's my turn again, as I am 61 today. Now 61 isn't anything 'special' at all in the way of birthdays, but that doesn't matter, as there is a birthday episode that I have been meaning to tell you about for quite some time - an episode that could easily have had fatal consequences for me.

The high school that I attended was in a small town located not too far from the Canada/US border. In fact, the southern edge of our town was the international border. Back in those days there was no consideration of such things as terrorist risks, and the local border crossing was almost completely open. There was a little booth which was only sometimes manned, but even if the guy was there, he usually did no more than glance up from his newspaper when people went by.

Because of the easy flow back and forth, our local schools had plenty of contacts with schools across the border. Sports teams would frequently visit for games, and our school band sometimes did joint concerts with US bands. Although I myself didn't have any particularly close friends on the other side of the border, many of my school-mates did.

The reason I bring this up is that the young men of my age who lived just a mile or so south of me - over on the other side of that barely visible border - lived in fear of something that I did not have to consider. This was the era of the Vietnam war, and young men in the US had to register for the draft. Not all of them ended up in the military of course; the system worked on a lottery basis. Each year a draw was held to put the dates of that year into a random order, and the boys with an 'early' birthdate were drafted first. Once the military had drafted as many as it felt necessary, boys with 'later' birthdates were free from concern.

The lottery for 'my' year - boys born in 1951 - was held in the summer of 1970, and my birthday was drawn as number 123 in the sequence. What would this have meant to me if I had been an American? As it turned out I was three digits away from safety. The military drew on the first 125 numbers that year, and I would have received a draft notice.

It is next to impossible to guess how things might have turned out. I was a normal healthy boy, and would have been completely eligible for service, having just dropped out of university that spring. It is quite conceivable that I would have been taken into uniform, trained, handed a weapon, and dropped from the sky into the jungles of Vietnam. I would now be either a Vietnam veteran ... or dead.

This is all completely hypothetical of course. No Canadian boys were involved in that conflict, as Canada was a non-belligerent, refusing all US requests to participate. But as our family sat and watched the news reports on TV during those years, with their terrifying lists of casualties published every night, I am sure that my parents many times over congratulated themselves on settling where they had, and not a few miles further south ...

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