



Support the American Red Cross.

Donate Now

[Back to Article](#)

[Click to Print](#)

TIME

Sunday, Apr. 18, 1999

Most Likely To Succeed

By John Cloud/Portland

Ethan is shrieking. It would be funny, but he is bleeding from the scrotum, and that's just not funny. In the adrenaline rush, he has shoved his dad's gun into his waistband and accidentally shot himself. His best friend Tom has stopped the car, a Chevy Suburban they paid someone \$80 to steal for what was supposed to be their big finale. The Oregon teens had planned a major heist, Ethan would later say, maybe half a million that they would tote in athletic bags from the money room at a Nordstrom department store. But that plan didn't work out; in fact, the whole night had gone right to hell. (Why didn't they stick to knocking over Burger Kings?) Tom had worked as a clerk at Nordstrom and--duh--someone recognized him when he and Ethan ambled in. So they walked out without taking a thing. They should have gone home, but after weeks of planning, they were primed. They settled on Rustica, a neighborhood Italian place with a nice sourdough. The petrified manager handed over \$500, and it was in the heady aftermath that not far away Ethan shot himself.

So here we are. Five hundred bucks, a hole blown into a very delicate place and DNA evidence drying on the seat of a stolen car. Though Ethan had the wound, both teens were ashen when they got to the hospital--"My God, they were white as sheets," friends would later say. The tale the boys concocted--some highly unbelievable stuff about a gang attack, followed by only slightly more believable stuff about a joyride gone bad--had made the cops suspicious. Rustica would be the inauspicious conclusion to a 12-month robbery spree by two boys who were, everyone thought, model young citizens.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. Something like 20 previous jobs had been nearly effortless, too easy to be planned. Just run in, wave guns (one of which didn't work), and the dorks unloaded cash drawers, whole tills--here, take it, don't kill me.

Kill them? Whatever. This was just high school ridiculousness

Things aren't so special anymore for Ethan and Tom. They're in the county jail, where if you need a root canal, as Ethan did last month, your lawyer has to file a three-page motion. In November, a year after

Rustica, Ethan pleaded guilty to three counts of robbery and promised to apologize to victims in all 20. Now 19 years old, he will spend 8 1/2 years in prison.

If not this week, then soon, Tom will almost certainly also plead guilty to several counts of armed robbery. Pleading means saying yes to 11 years in prison; when you're 19, that's hard to do. The ordeal has driven Tom's mom into deep despair and his friends into bewilderment. "It's still so unreal to me," says his girlfriend Jenny, now at college. "Tom is not the type of person who I could ever fathom would say, 'We're going to rob this place: you drive, you hold the gun, you take the money.' It's just unreal." So what went wrong?

You spend half your time in high school trying to be cool and the other half worrying about tests and practice and college. It's awful. But what if it isn't? What if kids worship you, as they did Tom, because he stands up to cops who tell students they can't loiter in the street at lunch hour? What if you jog with your coach because he likes you, and success comes easily in extracurriculars, and even when you doze in class, which is kind of often because you're so busy. You wake up with a joke that sets the classroom giggling? What if high school is not terrifying but a breeze?

On Nov. 10, 1996, Tom and Ethan were a couple of months into their junior year. That night, Tom and an unnamed accomplice (investigators say it was Ethan) took a gun to a Howard Johnson's, pointed it at manager Martin Davidson and started counting to 10. Davidson nervously handed over the money, and they were gone. Fifteen days later, according to his indictment, Tom struck again, this time at a Baskin Robbins. Then again the day before New Year's Eve, at a Burger King, where Ethan worked--which was convenient, since Tom didn't have to case the place. Then Baskin Robbins again, victimizing the same unfortunate scooper, a woman said to have nightmares still. But by this time, the boys surely had a feel for it, and if they felt for the victims, they could console themselves by rationalizing that no one was getting shot.

Though the boys stupidly kept robbing near school, which would later create a tidy pattern for prosecutors, they got more creative, more ambitious. They enlisted others, four in all, to serve as drivers or fellow gunmen. There was Todd Seymour, son of a former deputy D.A. in town, a gentle, bright child whose involvement stunned everyone the most. And Celia Reynolds, who met Ethan in middle school and considered him almost a brother. But usually it was just Tom and Ethan, who were careful and lucky. They kept things small time: a natural-foods market, a Barnes & Noble, a goofy New Age store.

It's surprising, though, that they didn't get caught sooner. To save money, the police bureau disbanded its robbery unit in June 1997; no one was examining theft patterns--geography, m.o., gun descriptions. Ten minutes on a crime-mapping computer in New York City might have stopped Tom and Ethan much faster. They were almost nabbed once: neighbors called police to say two boys were casing a Blockbuster store. When cops arrived, the boys escaped on foot (thank you, track team). One dropped a loaded .357 magnum handgun. Later, when the local Willamette Week broke the story of the robbery spree, the cop from the Blockbuster incident recognized Tom and Ethan's pictures on the front page.

Tom had always commanded attention. Even as a first-grader, he would go over to neighbor kids' homes and crack jokes that made parents chuckle. He often sketched, and people thought he would one day be a cartoonist, maybe--something special. But no one was ready for Tom's next act. Not even Tom.

O.K., friends admit, he sometimes didn't know where to draw the line. He was always cracking jokes at others' expense. "He liked to hit them when they were down," says Bill Cromley, Tom's high school Japanese teacher. He liked provoking a woman who clerked at 7-Eleven with sexual wisecracks. Fat kids got it too.

Tom and Ethan fed off each other. They were "feisty, defiant--I don't want to say it, but O.K., borderline a_____, " says Joe Simpson, the school's hulky vice principal and disciplinarian (who suspended Tom at least once). "Together, they were bad for each other. Some say Tom looked up to Ethan for his size"--Tom is shorter and 20 lbs. lighter--"but in terms of being a risk taker, Tom is at the top of the list." They were tight, but they were also competitive in the way that a lot of young male friends are. Tom had more money, but Ethan was cooler; they each had something the other wanted. And armed robbery, in its way, gets you both.

Even though police had been suspicious of Ethan's self-inflicted wound, it took them months to fully link the Chevy Suburban to the Rustica robbery and then to Ethan--and weeks more to confirm the connection with DNA tests. But by the following spring, authorities were finally ready to move. On April 16, 1998, they arrested Ethan at school.

Tom's world was about to collapse--he surely knew Ethan would tell all when faced by menacing prosecutors--but few knew why. Tom and Ethan had told almost no one about the full scope of their extracurriculars. Tom wanted to run, but Jenny begged him to stay for the prom the next night. It was a heart-wrenching, five-hour conversation. Tom was obviously in big trouble, but Jenny didn't know how much. In the end, Tom went to the prom, though friends say he and Jenny looked miserable the whole night.

Tom vanished after that, for months. He stayed in Portland mostly, sleeping at a friend's place or in Washington Park, showering at the Multnomah Athletic Club. There was no plan; he just stayed a step ahead, carrying a bag of his stuff and scraping by on a few bucks here and there. Inexplicably, it took several days for police to issue a warrant for his arrest. So, when his parents and friends helped him at first, they weren't breaking the law. But after the warrant was issued, the cops hunted him with increasing fervor. One time the entire robbery detail (which had been reconstituted) rode around the park on mountain bikes in the rain, trying in vain to find him.

But what most tantalized Portlanders about the story, what put it on the front page, was what happened next. Since early in the year, a bunch of Grant kids--upper-middle-class ones mostly, Tom's cohort--had been planning a June trip to Mazatlan, Mexico. Word got out that Tom might go. Authorities talked about

sending someone there, but decided against it--they're the local cops, after all, not the FBI. Did they even have jurisdiction?

Tom did turn up in Mazatlan. He was probably safer there than he had been in Washington Park. He probably took a bus--the last cheap and anonymous transportation left to an American fugitive. He hooked up with three dozen classmates, who had flown down together. Though many had supported him, Tom's presence, for once, was a downer. One girl wouldn't stand next to him in photos, and many just pitied him. When they returned, news of his whereabouts traveled quickly. One tearful girl called a detective directly.

Tom fled again, this time to Arizona. Short on cash, he applied for a job at the Fountain Cafe in Mesa, using his real name and Social Security number. Working his charm, he befriended the owners, Mike and Gale Moran, who later told reporters they thought Tom was just wonderful. He always took out the trash, liked to wear the red apron, that sort of thing. They let him drive their car, and he was friends with their daughter. "We had no idea," they would later say, over and over.

Back in Portland, the cops looked like idiots for letting the 18-year-old slip through their fingers, especially after the Oregonian in July reported the Mazatlan trip. They called in the big guns of U.S. law enforcement: America's Most Wanted. Detective Kelly Krohn, a tall, goateed man running the investigation, appeared on the TV show on July 25. Tom saw the segment and freaked. He ran again, to Las Vegas. But he knew it was over. He called his dad from a casino, told him he wanted to come in, and three FBI agents arrested him.

The city lashed out. Commentators complained that Tom's friends hadn't turned him in during the Mazatlan trip--"Portland, we have a problem," a columnist lamented. Prosecutors were even harsher. Five of the six people involved have now pleaded guilty, and because of mandatory-sentencing laws, most have received at least four years. Even Celia Reynolds, who reluctantly drove Tom and Ethan to and from a supermarket robbery (and somewhat less reluctantly took a share of the proceeds afterward) will spend a full two years in prison for her role.

Tom's case is likely to be over soon, and he will begin his sentence. He's trying to stay optimistic, stay Tom. He writes friends joking letters--he says he tells the days apart by watching a different daily parade of freaks on Jerry Springer. But lately he has been housed in a jail dorm with depressing and depressed people, folks on medication and not all there. It can be harrowing.

That emotion is familiar to Pamela Hartley. She still is the manager at the Rustica, where she was eating a late dinner that ghastly night when Tom and Ethan burst in. One of them pointed a gun at her and told her to "open the f_____ drawer." The experience is with her every night at the restaurant. "You know, people say they were kids, or they weren't really going to shoot, or whatever," Hartley says. "But they were in a very violent state of mind, screaming, just all over the place. They wanted everyone to think they would hurt them. And we did. I want them to think about that." They will have years to do so.

Find this article at:

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,23291,00.html>

Copyright © 2014 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)