

**Minor Mischief**  
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On October 29th of last year, the 167th anniversary of the Literary Club, my wife and I suffered an irreversible misfortune. Our son became a teenager. We knew that we still had some amount of time before the assault of hormones would change our happy, easy going, little boy into a randomly surly consumer of food and patience. We decided to enjoy the reprieve while it lasted.

Our son had been an extremely well behaved boy, almost to a fault. When addressed by adults, he invariably replied with "ma'am" or "sir". He maintained an irrepressible, positive attitude. He was kind and caring. He rarely complained of boredom. In successive years at summer camp, he won the accolades of "Honor Camper" and then "Camper of the Year." He had never been in trouble at school or elsewhere.

Whereas this sort of child made our experience as parents easier than an ill-tempered child would have, my wife and I worried that he might be missing some of life's more interesting experiences born of a curiosity of where the boundary lies between following rules blindly and judging certain rules to be unjustified or irrelevant. Would he become an intolerable do-gooder? Time would tell.

I certainly was not a do-gooder, nor was my wife. That is not to say that I was a troublesome preteen boy (I wasn't), but I had my moments.

One of the joys for me, in having my son, was the opportunity to observe his boyhood, remember my own, and compare the experiences.

Two major differences between our childhoods are the number of houses lived in and number of schools attended. My son has lived in one house and he has attended one school. By my thirteenth birthday, I had lived in three cities, six houses and had attended four elementary schools. My father had been transferred twice, thus the city changes. My parents had a predilection to move frequently, thus the house and school changes. It is not coincidental that my son has had a more stable sense of place.

Unlike my son and most people, I am an only child. I was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1961 into a mixed marriage of a northern father and a southern mother. The south in the early sixties was, in general, unaccepting of mixed anything with the possible exception of vegetables. My street had only one other child, a girl five or six years older than I who was also an only child. I spent a good amount of time with her and her single mother. Her proto-maternal instinct to protect and nurture me, to guide and play with me reinforced the behavioral lessons taught by my parents. She was my primary friend until I was almost five when my father was transferred to Philadelphia.

Being a well-mannered, scrawny, naive kid with a thick southern accent and bright red hair did not make integration with the norms of northern boy culture particularly easy. Acceptance of, and by, other children came slowly and cautiously. Not having had much in the way of social interaction with other boys added to my natural shyness.

Shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, I was at a local swim club. A group of boys with whom I had been playing indicated that they were going to the snack shack to get some ice cream. I said that I too wanted some ice cream. Laughter erupted, directed by pointed fingers, at me. One of the older boys asked if I had an itchy butt. I was embarrassed, hurt, and confused. Why were they being so mean to me? Whereas I had said that I wanted some ice cream, they heard an untranslated version of my southern accent that I wanted some ass cream. I wished that I had a big brother to straighten out those ridiculers.

My desire for an older brother persisted until I spent the night at a school friend's home. He had thirteen siblings including six brothers. Envy clouded my mind. I anticipated that all of those boys and I would play various games and sports with a camaraderie known only to those lucky enough to have brothers. I was wrong. It became clear that one of the responsibilities of older brothers was to beat the hell out of younger brothers. No thanks. Perhaps being an only child had benefits, even if I had to go it alone. I learned how to entertain myself with almost anything including fallen leaves, sticks, creek beds, rocks, or a stalk of grass turned into a whistle.

When I was seven we moved into a neighborhood that had three boys my age, none of whom had an older brother to terrorize us. All of them had sisters. Although I was a neophyte in navigating the world of boys' life, the naturally occurring fascination with all things flatulent put me in good stead with my newfound friends. It is impossible to calculate the number of hours we spent making fart sounds with our armpits simply to elicit shrieks of "eww" and "gross" from their sisters. The prank never got old and it always worked.

We played football in our backyards and watched football on our grainy television screens. We particularly looked forward to watching the Chicago Bears play. We waited with delighted, giggling anticipation for the moment that one of the greatest linebackers, ever, made a tackle. The announcers would say without cracking a smile or suppressing a laugh, "Tackle by Dick Butkus." We howled with glee.

I finally felt accepted by my peers. An easy familiarity grew between us such that we could joke about each other without taking offence. The ice cream incident was now funny to me. I would have laughed at me too and expected me to know it was part of normal boy's banter.

Our next home was one of twelve on a double cul-de-sac surrounded by woods. In that small enclave were no less than 18 children within one year of my age of ten, most of whom were boys. There were plenty of older brothers as well. It was this mixture of older brothers and a critical mass of ten year old boys that fostered in us a certain mischievousness unique to boys. Not a doorbell was spared our attention as we roamed the night ringing and running.

I discovered that not all big brothers were necessarily evil. Some were willing to share bottle rockets and firecrackers, which were off limits to boys of our age. A few of us decided it would be cool to see if we could light a soft drink can full of gasoline with bottle rockets. We set the can on top of a large piece of plywood in an undeveloped lot at the end of one of the cul-de-sacs. We imagined something like a Hollywood movie explosion would occur on our first attempt. The bottle rockets were aimed and lit. All misses. After numerous shots, we decided that it would make sense to spill the gas onto the plywood granting a much larger target. Again failure. Perhaps if we threw firecrackers at the target from a closer distance, we could spark the special effect. No such

luck. The most fearless amongst our group, a chipped tooth daredevil whose father had played professional football, took his matches and walked to within match flicking distance. His aim was true. The gas soaked board erupted into flame with an audible whoosh. Instead of running away, like most of us did, he ran towards the board, grabbed a large stick and flipped the board over, snuffing out most of the fire. He then proceeded to eradicate the remaining flames by frantically kicking dirt in their direction. Unfortunately the incident was noticed by the next-door father who shared our secret with our respective parents. Most of us were punished with groundings, extra chores and the like. The daredevil's father offered a more physical punishment that would today most certainly have garnered the interest of local authorities.

Slightly more than one year after arriving into the midst of a proper neighborhood, as far as I was concerned, my father once again was transferred, this time to Cincinnati. I railed against the idea of moving away from my cornucopia of children I had finally found. I dreaded the prospects of a new school, a new neighborhood and a new group of boys with which I would be forced to assimilate.

Less than 30 days after our move, I was standing in the line for sixth graders on the first day of school. I was the first to arrive. Soon a larger boy stepped in line behind me. Before I could say hello, he said, "Are you sure you're in the right line? You look like you belong in the fifth grade line." A marker had been laid down that needed to be repaid.

It turned out that my tormentor occupied the seat in front of me in our homeroom class. My eyes bored imaginary holes into the back of his head. A few weeks into the school year he was called on to read aloud the text of a film strip regarding the country of Turkey. Every time he read the word "Turkey", I would whisper "Turtle." After five or six of my suggestive whispers, he read, "To the north of Turtle is the Black Sea." The class laughed until quieted by our frustrated teacher. Revenge was mine! We became fast friends.

Later that year we discovered that we could pick lint from our socks and surreptitiously send the tufts aloft. Every class was subject to our aerial, floating lint bombardment. In one particular classroom, the air currents were such that any lint sent aloft from our seats in the back of the class would find their way to the front of the class directly into the teacher's desk area. Great fun was

had. We never were caught. That friend was best man in my wedding as was I in his. He has been the closest thing to a brother I have ever had, minus the beatings.

Being an only child combined with not having many other boys as neighbors created obstacles to an easy understanding of the dynamics of groups of young boys. Yet eventually I got the hang of it, even if a bit later than most.

I harbor a smoldering sense of guilt that my son, in spite of having an older sister, has never lived in a neighborhood with other children. He has not expressed disappointment in his isolation. It may be the reason he has been so well behaved.

The remaining question of whether my son would become an intolerable do-gooder was answered three days ago, this past Friday. I received a phone call from the head of the middle school my son attends. He told me that my son was in a bit of trouble necessitating an after school detention. He went on to say that my good little boy had attempted a prank that went awry. My son had sprayed something called "Liquid Ass" into what he thought was his friend's locker. Not only was it the wrong locker, the liquid seeped into the locker below doubling the olfactory damage. He was forced to apologize to the two offended parties and to scrub out both lockers after school.

The head of school and I laughed about the attempted prank and agreed that this is something either one of *us* might have done, but that it was unexpected from my son. I admit that I felt a surge of relief that his boyhood is safely intact.