

Not Exactly Rocket Scientists and Other Stories

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Synopsis of Stories

We introduce our collection of short stories, ourselves -- and our town -- in a short "*From the Authors*," three lifelong friends who have managed to find chaos, confusion and delight in our misadventures for a very long time, beginning in our earliest days in school. We turned out all right (we think), and we write these stories as a celebration of the miracle of friendship and the gift of a simpler time, walking on the softer side of reality. If we have not always been able to separate fact from creative liberty -- after all, stories *are* stories -- we intend to embarrass no one but ourselves.

We do that quite nicely.

By way of introduction, we begin with our zany ***Title Story*** -- boys building rockets, in the wake of Sputnik, confirming what Bill Bryson said of the 50s: "It was a wonderful time to be a noisy moron." We didn't try to screw up. It's just that *we were not exactly rocket scientists*, our launches a greater threat than anything the Russians were cooking up.

Someone has said that play is about how we first learned to read other people as well as the world, and the next series of stories takes place as we play our sports. Or at least try to. Our disasters range from the bowling lanes ("***Banned for Life***") to organized sports ("***Poor Bastard***," "***Mr. Jaeger***," "***You Win Some***," "***And You Lose Some***,") chaos and stupid our only true teammates. We find comedic confusion in our backyards ("***The Commissioner***"), on the local ponds where we play hockey on ice resembling bubble wrap and cleverly mark our pucks as "mine" ("***The Short Hills Detroit's***"), and almost come to ruin over a disturbingly misprinted 1958 baseball card ("***God***

Bless You Harry Chiti"). We didn't even have to actually *play* a sport to screw up ("***Mister, I Can't Even See You***"), and from time to time we took our goofiness on the road ("***Eat a MAD, Newk***"). Our dogs took most of this in stride, unless they too lost their bearings ("***Rusty, The Wonder Dog of Essex County***").

The next group of stories takes us on misadventures in school. We visited wrongs visited on good people, although usually by accident. Substitute teachers were rarely a match for our mischief ("***Please, Mrs. Penalty, Not the Faulkner***"), and even the smartest teachers ("***The Great Ripple Tank Disaster,***" "***Shit, We Forgot the Eggs,***" and "***Suds Cuts It Close***") suffered through our chaos. Our efforts to learn a bit about the real world on something called "the field trip" ("***The Camden Kid***") could collapse in spectacular fashion, suggesting we should remain in our youthful bubble, maybe forever. School dances ("***The Dancing Bear's Carnival Surprise,***" "***What Was That Again, Coach?***" and "***At Least She Had Fun***") were a disaster. No surprise there. And the terror of dates with real girls ("***First Date***") and something horrible called "dancing school" ("***Mr. Barkle Loses It***") opened up an entirely new world of trouble. Collisions of the tectonic plates went more smoothly. Teachers were not even safe *outside* of school, where chance meetings away from the classroom were always awkward and a clear and present danger to that delicate student-teacher membrane which usually kept things in balance ("***Sinking the Bismarck***" and "***Got A Tip?***").

The next section is the Schill Church Trilogy, where we seek some kind of redemption, doing good deeds as Crucifers to balance the account. It just doesn't work out that way. Donning something called "cassocks," our missteps were legendary, our clumsiness covering all three of the essential duties of the acolyte ("***The Great Collection Plate Disaster,***" "***The Great Cross Disaster,***" and "***The Great Mite box Disaster***"). Understandably, some in our church

confused us with "Cossacks," as we were often more dangerous to the congregation than those marauding Ukrainians.

Summer could be high-season of our boyhood idiocy, as the next section suggests. Boys all over town are exiled to camps ("**The Homesicks**"), some finding questionable new talents ("**Fat Jack D'Mezzo**") and others failing hopelessly in basic camp and scouting skills, unlearned at home ("**Son of A Hitch**"). The true magic of baseball -- our summer religion -- is revealed to a shy camper in a small town in upper New York State ("**Son, I'd Be Happy To**"), as others take off on a hopelessly under-planned and under-supervised canoe trip, the call of the wild and the bonds of friendship soon colliding with disastrous weather and a certain adult beverage ("**I'll Have A Manhattan**"). Even responsible adult supervision doesn't spare us ("**This Is No Fun**," "**The Captain Bill**," "**So That's How She Got the Bird!**" and "**How We Earned Our Chops**"), the days of summer and holiday stupid bringing a different set of rules and holding the promise of adventure and the hint of magic, at least to teenage boys with a shameless talent for bullshit.

We close with a poignant story to remind us that only through the grace and patience and love of the many adults we met as boys were we able to "grow up gently." They were the "Greatest Generation," and our journey rested on their broad shoulders. This is our favorite story, written as a tribute to them all ("**The Most Important Photo I Never Saw**").

A brief "**Afterword**" brings us full circle, happy updates in the continuing story of many of our lives, or the sadder stories of loss in others. There have been many surprises, and maybe that's the magic of it all.

We never knew what was just around the corner.